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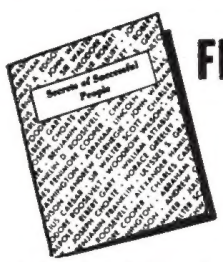

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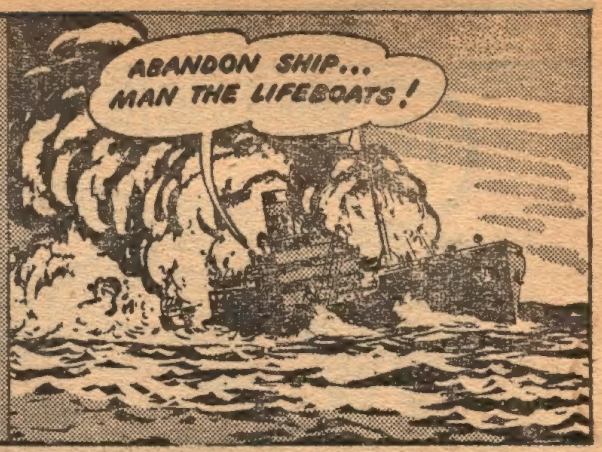

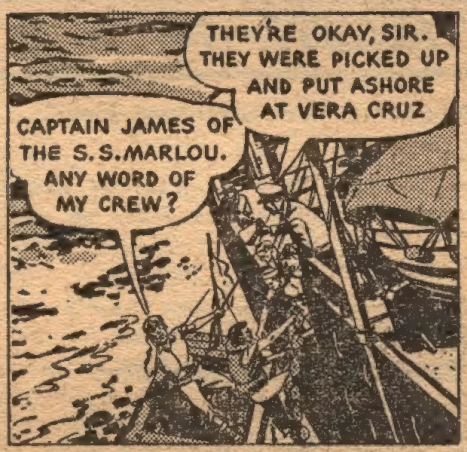

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WESTERN MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER ISSUE PUBLISHED AUGUST 3!

VOLUME 55 AUGUST, 1949 NUMBER 4

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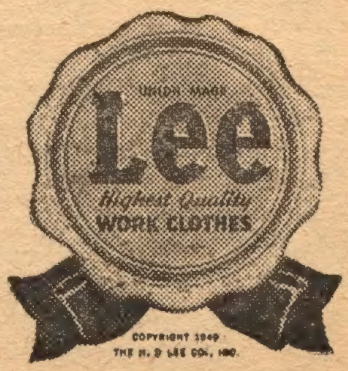

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POPULAR FILMS

Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

Ted Palmer Picks:

For Comedy-Romance: "The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend" with Betty Grable, Cesar Romero, Rudy Vallee and Olga San Juan (20th Century-Fox). Technicolor.

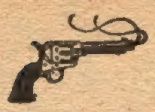
Beautiful, blonde, gun-happy Freddie Jones (Betty Grable) gets out of town fast after accidentally shooting the Honorable Judge Alfalfa O'Toole in the seat of his pants. Fleeing on a train, she is mistaken by the conductor for "little Hilda Swandumper from Bashful Bend" on her way to teach at Snake City. This is good enough for Freddie—only she knows nothing about school teaching. Charlie Hingelman (Rudy Vallee), under her charms, gives her a few lessons in teaching at night. Freddie's past, however, in the form of Blackie (Cesar Romero), catches up with her. Through a succession of hilarious events, the town is set afeudin', and Freddie gets taken back for trial. She almost goes free when Blackie offers to marry her, but Freddie finishes that by shooting at the judge again. Where and when? Why, in the end, of course. *Good spoofing with lots of broad laughs.*

• • •

For Adventure—"Illegal Entry" with Howard Duff, Marta Toren and George Brent (Universal).

To assist Immigration Inspector Dan Collins (George Brent) break up a gang that smuggles aliens across the Mexican border by plane, Burt Powers (Howard Duff) gets hired by the gang as a pilot. Lucky for him that Anna Duvak (Marta Toren)—an unwilling gang member—tips him off on a trap to test his loyalty. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to break the gang up and get the girl. *A semi-documentary with good, fast action.*

For Murder Mystery—"Manhandled" with Dorothy Lamour, Sterling Hayden, and Dan Duryea (Paramount).



A hard-pressed author, worried about a recurrent nightmare in which he kills his wife for her jewelry, visits a psychiatrist to get things off his chest. The psychiatrist's secretary, Merl Kramer (Dorothy Lamour), mentions this dream to Karl Benson (Dan Duryea), a private investigator, and a chain of events are set off which lead to murder of the wife, theft of the jewels and some of the dirtiest double-dealing you've seen in some time. Sterling Hayden is the insurance investigator who works on the case. *A film, well-played for suspense, with a neat, ironical wind-up.*

• • •

For Sports—"The Stratton Story" with James Stewart and June Allyson (MGM).

One of the pluckiest stories in sports is retold in this film version of the life of Monty Stratton—brilliant young Chicago White Sox pitcher who lost his leg in a hunting accident after the 1938 major league season. Overcoming this handicap, Stratton learned to use an artificial leg, and in 1946 pitching in the East Texas League, he won 18 games. Although Hollywood over-sentimentalizes the story, this remains a good baseball picture. Jimmy Stewart plays Stratton, June Allyson, his wife, while Gene Bearden, Jimmy Dykes, Bill Dickey and Mervyn Shea lend authenticity to baseball sequences. *It makes a pleasant evening.*

• • •

For A Western—"The Younger Brothers" with Wayne Morris and Janis Page (Warners). Technicolor.

The four Younger brothers, who were once the "Dead End" kids of the West, along with Jesse James and his gang, find it's tough to go straight herein. A vindictive police officer, leading a misguided posse, and a beautiful, female outlaw leader both try to get the boys in trouble. Some good straight-shooting, hard riding and quick thinking save the day. *It has all you want in a Western.*

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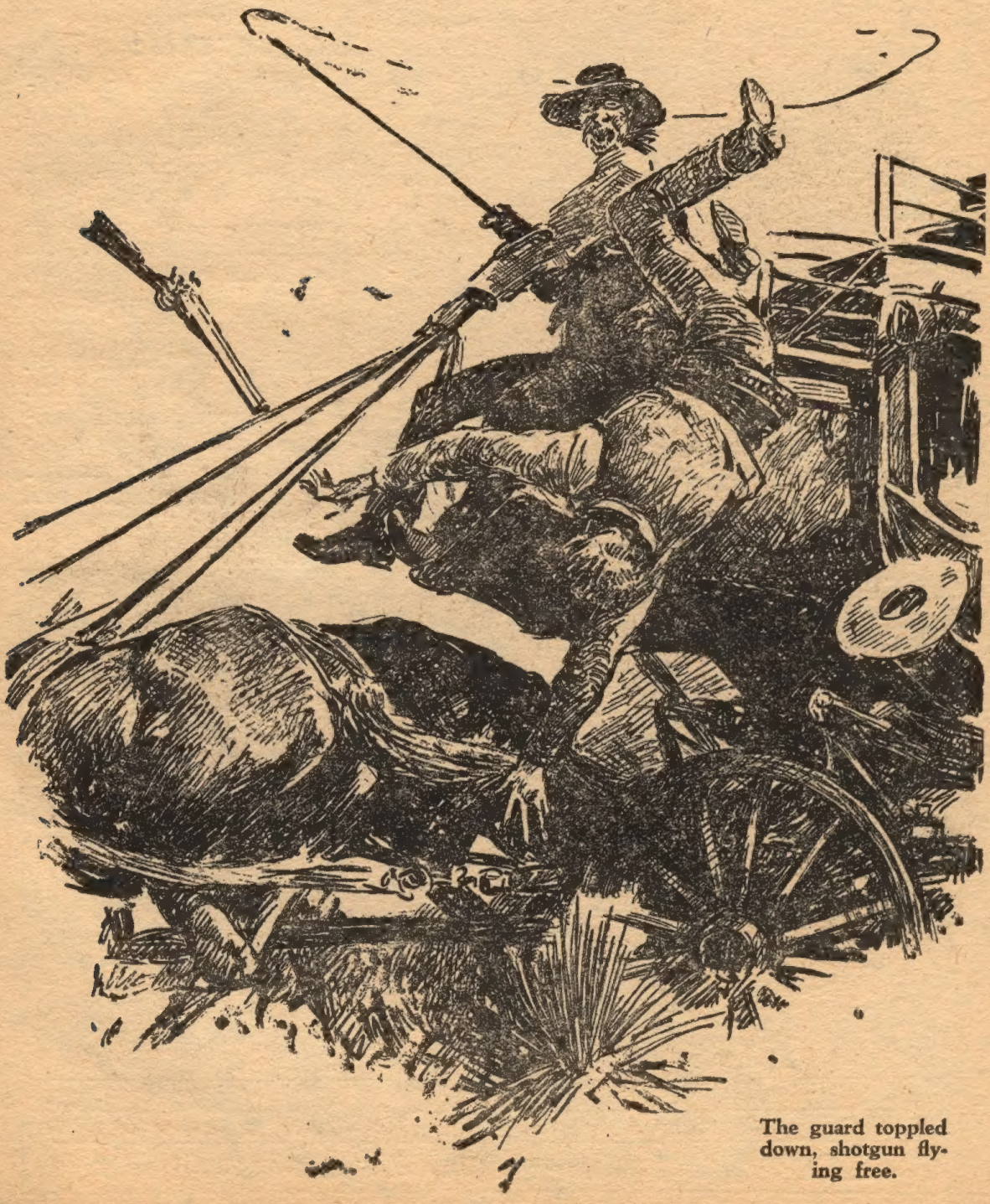
RIDE THE LAND,

By

GEORGE C. APPELL



The guard toppled down, shotgun flying free.

RIDE THE SKY!

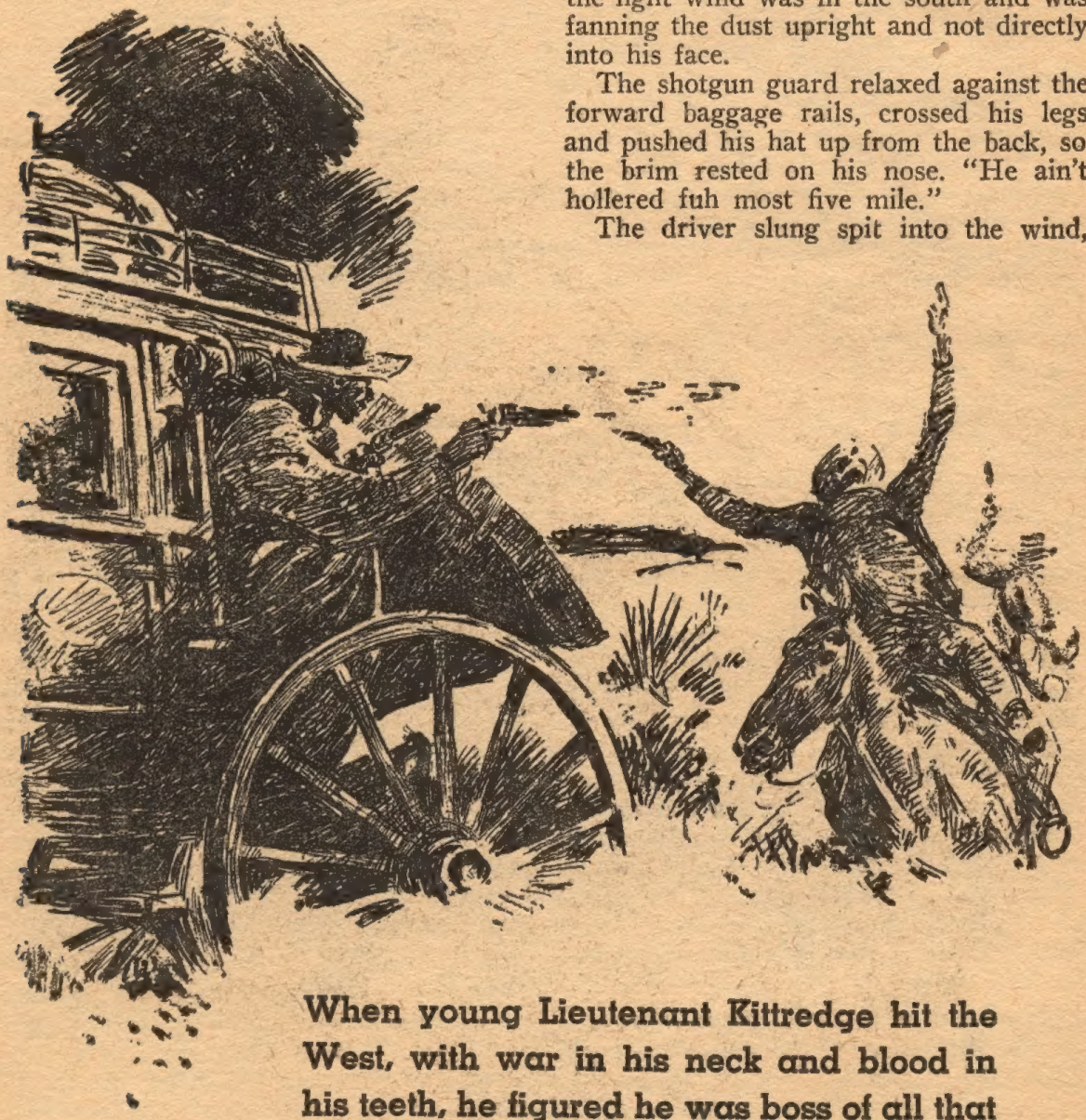
CHAPTER ONE

Death Comes Aboard at Truro's Wells

THE DRIVER of the thoroughbrace coach out of Piny Station began pulling down his teams as he raised Truro's Wells in the sandy distance. He wanted to bring the horses in dry. He wanted to save his off rear wheel, which had developed a banshee screech a mile back, grease lavings notwithstanding. He see-sawed the ribbons and brought the teams down to a heavy trot, thankful that the light wind was in the south and was fanning the dust upright and not directly into his face.

The shotgun guard relaxed against the forward baggage rails, crossed his legs and pushed his hat up from the back, so the brim rested on his nose. "He ain't hollered fuh most five mile."

The driver slung spit into the wind,



When young Lieutenant Kittredge hit the West, with war in his neck and blood in his teeth, he figured he was boss of all that wild country. . . . So he rode to lick the ghost of fabulous Big Dan Frame—who was Old Man Frontier, himself!

hoping it might arc into the left window, but it didn't. He played the whip back and forth a few times, grinning. "Wait'll he gits to the Furnace. He won't know so damned much." He flipped the whip again to keep the teams at a trot, which would be good for them until the last half mile, when they'd walk.

"He's only a buck, ain't he?"

"Uh-huh." The driver took up slack. "Claxton'll train him."

The sharp stutter of knuckles on the roof brought the guard's head around. A voice snapped, "What's the delay?"

"Ten thousand buffler crossin' the trail."

"No!" A man came out the window headfirst, clawing for the top rail, writhing his hips, snaking out long legs. He braced a boot against the window rim, heaved mightily and drew himself up to the baggage lashings. He squatted behind the guard, eyes intent on the distances. "Where?"

"They musta gone, mister. Fast, them buffler are." The guard faced forward again and adjusted his hat to protect himself against the sun. It wasn't so much the heat as the glare. The sun itself was gone but the western skies were a wash of painful yellow all along the horizon; yellow that was brittle-hot above the alkali dust and burned off at the top into purple shot with a broad smear of red.

The young man said, "So-o..." He sat against a canvas belting that was holding his own gear to the roof, and rummaged in his shirt pockets for a smoke. "I may be new out here, but..." He couldn't think of anything particularly apt at the moment so he drew a leather case from a pocket and opened it. He wanted the guard to look around and see the cheroots and request one, but the guard didn't, and the young man stuck one in his side teeth, like he'd seen older men do, and lighted it.

Smoke drifted north on the breeze.

The driver pulled down and the teams shuffled to a walk. Truro's Wells consisted of three weather-rutted buildings that looked like six in the confusing sunset flare.

"You goin' through, ain'tcha?" the driver asked.

The single passenger exhaled deliberately and slowly. "To Crockett's Furnace."

The stage wasn't swaying now. The rails were steady and the passenger got to his knees so he could see ahead. "What's that?"

"Change station."

"When do we reach Crockett's Furnace?"

The driver pondered. "Well...we're due at dawn." The off rear wheel howled piercingly. "But we may be late." He kicked the guard's instep. "Big Dan Frame may be ridin' tonight."

"Who's he—the buffalo herder?" The passenger was smiling, but neither the driver nor the guard moved a muscle.

"Ha-a-rdly, mister." A figure came out of the nearest building and stood watching them. Two boys led fresh teams from a corral, dancing clear of high-stepping hoofs. The stage rolled up to the nearest building and the driver set the brake and looped reins. "Truro's!" he bellowed.

There was a plankwalk in front of the station, shaded by a rickety veranda. A tall man sat in a broken wicker chair in the shadows, feet cocked on the rail. He didn't get up.

Truro hooked a grimy thumb at the stage. "There's yore ride."

The tall man nodded and said, "I see it."

Truro bent to the traces, helping the guard release the teams; the two Mex boys backed the fresh ones in, still careful of the hoofs. The driver jumped down and raised his face to the rails. "You wanta drink, mister, you better git it now."

"Thanks, I don't." But he climbed down anyway, to stretch his legs. He stepped into the shade of the veranda and nodded once at the seated man. "Coming with us?"

The man didn't answer.

His eyes rested calmly on the two service Colts the passenger carried in his belt. His eyes dropped and noted the boots, the faded seam on the dusty blue trousers; the once-blue shirt that alkali had turned to a Confederate gray, and the hat.

"Soldier?" he gruffed.

"Sort of."

The man took his feet off the rail and

stood up. He tugged an outsized white kerchief from his hip pocket and blew his nose. "Thought Claxton ran that."

"Claxton?"

The man strolled away from the broken wicker chair and stuffed his white kerchief back into his pocket.

The passenger's eyes followed him, taking in the black hat, the washed-out checkered shirt, the dark trousers. The man wore a Peacemaker on his right hip. Then the passenger was faced with the poster on the wall behind the chair, and he began reading it.

MEANWHILE the man with the Peacemaker turned and inspected the other. He saw flat-muscled strength in the high frame, saw it in the slim legs, the easy shoulder slouch, the wide wrists. He inspected the face and saw cheekbones wider than the jaws, a scatter of freckles under the newly-acquired weather burn, and a certain arrogant lift to the upper lip, so that the blades of upper teeth showed.

The passenger placed his cheroot under those teeth, took a final inhale and threw it away. He turned from the poster, smoke spouting through narrow nostrils. "That man must be crazy."

"Who?" The man in the black hat frowned; his wind-split lips tight together.

The driver swung up to the box and worked his feet along the dash for the best position. He didn't like night runs. "One minute!"

"That man in the poster—Blackmer."

"He's gotta make a livin', ain't he?" The man in the black hat lifted his shoulders so that it seemed as if his head was down.

"Not that way, he hasn't."

"This is a big country, mister . . . soldier. . . sergeant. . ."

"Lieutenant." The passenger walked around the man and left the veranda. "Kittredge," he called, and climbed into the stage.

The man on the veranda moved his eyes to the poster a last time, and smiled. The usual word WANTED was over the picture. The picture was of Owen Blackmer, described as five feet and a finger more high, maybe one hundred twenty pounds heavy, and riding either alone or with one of two companions who were not described. No one had ever gotten close enough to see them clearly, or if they had were no longer alive enough to tell of it. Owen Blackmer, it said under his picture, was desired by certain peace officers at widely-scattered points, such as Crockett's Furnace, Reunion City, Tom Lord County, anywhere therein; Carson's Station and Staked Ridge. In each of these places, the small print said, he had alone or in company caused the deaths of fourteen citizens and the removal by theft of cash totalling eighty thousand dollars.

"Mount up there!" The driver had the reins loose.

The man slouched off the veranda and climbed into the stage and sat opposite Kittredge. The whip exploded, the fresh teams lunged out and the stage whirled away from Truro's into the twilight, leaving purple dust behind.

"Where you from?' the man opposite Kittredge asked pleasantly. He had both hands braced wide on each side of him against the stage's motion.

"Pittsburgh," Kittredge said. He listened for the whine of a dry axle, recalling the filled grease buckets he'd seen under the mail boot. He was sure the Mex boys had hung them aboard, yet it seemed to him that they'd been on the ground. But it was hard to tell exactly, in the thickening darkness.

"Pittsburgh, eh?" The man hitched closer to the window. "Live there?"

"Strike duty." Kittredge didn't believe in talking too much; it isn't a good idea in any profession, and he was of the opinion that a butt-splintered jawbone or a clean blue bullet hole were more eloquent than any words man could fashion.

"Well, well." The man was staring into the moonlight, chin on fist; his white kerchief was on his lap.

The country was rough, west of Truro's, and it would remain rough almost all the way to the Furnace. But it was the shortest way and therefore the best; any other route to avoid that terrain would have taken them south toward Reunion City and southwest to the fringes of Tom Lord County and then north to the Furnace, which would have been contrary to the clauses contained in the mail contract.

Ten miles west of Truro's they were

jouncing clumsily at a walk, lumbering from one side to the other as the wheels yawned in the ruts; topside, Kittredge could hear the shotgun guard shift his feet, hitch his weight, change the gun from one hand to the other. And presently he heard the ruffling snores of the driver, asleep at the ribbons.

He squinted through the moon haze that sifted through the window and thought the other man was asleep. The kerchief was still on his lap, clutched tightly. His free hand was close to the Peacemaker and his face was down under his hat brim.

The bite of turning metal on wood whined sharply, squeaked to silence and then whined rhythmically lowly, monotonously.

The guard grunted several colorful words of early Anglo-Saxon origin and called to the driver. Harness whimpered, hoofs scraped and the stage stopped.

They all got to the ground, and the driver went around back and reached under the mail boot; he returned to the front axle and looked there, and he crawled under the body and looked there. Then he confronted the guard and wanted to know where the grease buckets were. The guard did not know, and repeated his assertion profanely.

"It's them greasers that done it," the driver muttered. He took off his hat and scratched his hair and shook his head. "I ain't stretched a greaser yet, but when I git back to Truro's I'll mos' surely do so . . . Well, we kin try." He put on his hat and climbed up. "Load, gents. We got mail this run."

They loaded, and the stage rocked west along the night-gray road, its off rear wheel bleating every second. The man opposite Kittredge sat by the window again and Kittredge wondered why he didn't put his kerchief away.

The driver was snoring again, not in ruffles but in a deep, majestic regularity as evenly-spaced as a rip-saw tearing through equal lengths of wood. The outer world of land and sky closed in across the neighborhood, horizonless distances that were no longer as empty as they had been; closed in across the whip-planked towns and the somnolent herds and the endless emptiness between. . . .

KITTREDGE snapped out of his dozing and sat straight on the tilted seat and swallowed rustily. The man opposite was fully awake, bunching his kerchief to his nose. "Damn dust," the man complained, and blew snortingly, face to the window. Then he was flapping the kerchief out the window hurriedly, as if freeing it of mucous. He drew it in and folded it and put it away.

Kittredge's mouth was suddenly dry and mice-feet were tickling his back and for no reason he could name the warm heels of his hands found the butts of his revolvers.

He heard the guard utter a questioning curse and turn in his seat; he suddenly saw the outline of two riders appearing at the hubs and heard the throbbing of hoofs. He saw their outline and the arching throw of their horses' necks. Then he saw their faces, and the closest one was small and narrow and it belonged to a small and narrow man. "Driver, pull down and brake!"

The stage jerked.

Kittredge turned to the voice three feet from him, across the coach: "Lift 'em, Lieutenant, and keep 'em there!" The Peacemaker was full on him, and steady.

The driver came awake and instinctively whacked down with all reins and the four animals bolted in fright. The shotgun crashed twice in quick succession and the stage spun over to the left and righted clumsily and raced forward at a racketing gallop that tossed its occupants off the seats to the floorboards.

Kittredge drove a boot heel into the checkered shirt and went deaf to the blast of the Peacemaker and felt the shoulder of his shirt shake. He snagged out both Colts and slammed off one shot from each and saw the checkered shirt twitch, sag, and collapse to the rattling floorboards. The Peacemaker slid free and he grabbed it and thrust it into a boot and clambered to his feet. There was the flat, split-shingle bark of a shot and the guard toppled down, shotgun flying free, and flopped from sight beyond the thundering wheels. They wailed in protest at greaseless speed.

Clutching, clawing for support, Kittredge reached the window rim and spread his knees wide for support and squeezed

off five shots from one revolver. The small man threw up his arms and rose in his stirrups and half-turned and fell gracefully away and was gone. Two saddle horses were running empty down the desert, heads pumping to the strain of their fear-crazed gallop.

"Rein down, driver!"

The stage skidded wildly and the axles shrieked and it came to a thrashing halt that threw Kittredge against the seat and knocked the air from his throat. He kicked open a door and sprang out and tripped in the ruts and wind-milled for balance.

The driver was beside him. "All right, mister?"

"Hell, yes!" Kittredge pushed him away roughly. He was very sure of himself at all times, was Clay Kittredge. "They get the guard?"

"In the back." The driver's tone was bitter. "Poor ol' Jawn, him an' me . . . what got you?"

The shirt shoulder was ripped wide and Kittredge's white flesh showed starkly. He yanked the Peacemaker from his boot and held it butt-first at the driver.

"Present for you. Its donor's in the coach."

"Yuh . . . I should've knowed this all along."

"Knowed what?" Kittredge mimicked, brushing himself off.

The driver stared at him as if he didn't —couldn't—like him very much.

"...The lookout dodge. They ain't used it in years, though." He flipped open the Peacemaker and studied the shells. "One man rides the run, an' signals if it's all right f'r the others to jump." He continued to regard the Peacemaker. "What'd he use—a towel?"

Kittredge felt stumped. Then he admitted that the man had blown his nose, maybe.

"Yuh..that, an' the buckets. It wasn't them greaser boys unhooked the buckets." The driver walked to the open door. "It was him in there." He leveled the Peacemaker at the dead body and emptied it. The shots echoed rattlingly into the night and fluttered away to silence. "You ain't Big Dan Frame, not by a long sight. Come on, mister, we got corpses to collect."

"Big Dan Frame? Wasn't that him?" Kittredge sensed a wrathful helplessness rising in him at mention of the name.

The driver studied him quizzically in the weak moon wash. "Good God A'mighty! You think Big Dan'd fumble a little stick-up like this?" And the driver's laughter howled raucously to the heavens, rending the death-cool silences with the irregular sobs of a knowledgeable man who is suddenly in the presence of ignorance.

CHAPTER TWO

The Devils of Satan's Stairs

THE tired teams dragged the stage into Crockett's Furnace on axles that whickered painfully and left tatters of woodsmoke behind in the dust. The four stiffening bodies were tossed out and the women were shooed away and the gathering men stood viewing what buckshot and bullets could do to human flesh.

Kittredge offered his hand to the driver and, after a pause, the driver took it. Kittredge wished him luck.

The driver pulled back his palm. "You'll need that, from here on." He rubbed his palms together carefully. "Not me, mister. My best to Claxton."

Kittredge sensed the anger surge up again. His upper lip lifted, showing his teeth. His gray eyes were sharp in the early morning light. "Thanks for helping me shoot these people last night." He shouldered his way through the awed crowd and stalked toward the false front bearing the legend: STABLES & FEED.

It was already hot in Crockett's Furnace and the eye-knifing yellow shimmer of sun waves temporarily blinded him as he entered the shadows of the stable. He made out the form of a man standing by some bales and groped toward him. "I want a rig."

"Your rig's here, sir."

Kittredge blinked his eyes back into focus. He stretched them open and placed them on the man in front of him. The man saluted limply, without holding it.

"Sergeant Claxton, sir. From Camp Kiowa to Crockett's Furnace to transport the lieutenant."

"Oh?" He blinked again and found full focus. "It's nice to know someone's glad to see me." He put down his gear. "Where's the rig?" He didn't return the

salute. It was much too late for that.

"Yonder, sir." Claxton's body was short and thick but his hands and feet were small. He had a red face that refused to tan and red hair matted his wrists. "We'll carry the surgeon today."

"The who?" Kittredge was staring into the white glare of the street at a bearded man in a gray suit and a gray sombrero who was standing next to the rig. He was talking to a woman—a girl, Kittredge guessed—and her back was toward him. Her wide-hooped green skirt came to an apex at a very thin waist and her shawl hung almost to the small of her back.

She carried a fringed parasol that shadowed her hair, and Kittredge couldn't see what color it was.

"Surgeon, sir. He's on contract. Visits once a week."

They started out of the stable. "Hasn't Kiowa got a doctor?"

"For eighteen men. . . sir?"

Kittredge's narrow nostrils flared open and closed and flared open again. Kiowa, they had told him in Pittsburgh, was not the largest post in the west but one consonant with his rank and ability, nonetheless. "Only eighteen—?" he started to say, and then was being introduced to the contract surgeon.

"A pleazuh, suh. A pleazuh indeed." Dr. Canning looked him up and down. "An' you ah the gentlemun who caused the Blackmuh boys to depaht this uth?"

Kittredge bowed briefly and admitted he was. "Simple matter of shooting fast enough." He touched his hatbrim to the girl. "Clay Kittredge, miss. At your eternal service."

She inclined her head but did not smile, and Kittredge saw that her hair was the color of dark taffy and that her grave eyes were a deep blue.

He had an odd, defenseless sensation, a feeling that although her mouth was not smiling, her eyes were. He did not like to be regarded with amusement, even by a golden-skinned young lady who brought the scent of jasmine to him and who, he instantly decided, was the loveliest young lady this side of Pittsburgh. Or Baltimore, even.

Claxton sprang to the reins, the doctor handed up his bag and climbed after it, and Kittredge offered his arm.

The doctor coughed apologetically. "My daughtuh, suh. Miss Sue."

"Miss Sue?"

She shook her head. "I'm staying in town, Mr. Kittredge, where we live. Only father visits the post."

Kittredge had learned some elaborate manners somewhere, the kind that young men new to them always over-elaborate and stumble across. "And if I may call tomorrow evening?"

Her mouth smiled then. "Mr. Kittredge, from what I saw at the stage station, you're quite too busy for social calls."

Claxton popped the whip and reined back and made the team prance, the doctor coughed impatiently and Kittredge had to mount. They rolled down the street at a smart trot and left a curtain of dust behind them that showed nothing but the high blue sky beyond it.

The doctor was asking, "An' who shot him, sahgunt?"

"Call it Dan Frame," Claxton replied as he slashed the whip, and he and the doctor laughed together.

Kittredge clutched his gear to his knees and sank into a sullen silence that lasted all the way to the post.

CAMP KIOWA was a sod-bag post upon which the government had not seen fit to waste much wood; it was a six foot deep rectangle sixty feet wide and maybe twice as long, bagged along its borders and rimmed, on the inside, with a sentry-walk that was infrequently manned. The only buildings were the stable, the barracks and the officers' billet, built for two.

It was raining when Clay Kittredge dropped off the rig and sank up to his ankles in sucking wet mud; it was a black rain that had come suddenly from the northwest, bringing with it cold cloud scud and a chill wind. He was in a vicious mood; the sentry at the gate had merely stared at him uncomprehendingly; there was no striker to lift his gear; mess facilities, he saw, were contained under a canvas fly. There was no sutler's store.

"Sergeant Claxton, have a man report here when you've turned in the rig."

"Yessir, and I'll drop the doctor on the way." The dispensary was a feed shed behind the stables, a location not wholly

disapproved by Dr. Canning. It was a tenet of his that if a man couldn't cure his wounds with a jackknife and a jolt of whiskey, no doctor was needed anyway.

Kittredge picked up his gear and entered the two-room billet. It had not been occupied for almost a year, its last inhabitant having become fatigued with whiskey and ordered to Oregon to cool off. Claxton had been in command of this half-troop digging since then.

A bowlegged trooper with pop eyes and a small mouth reported as striker. "O'Mara, sir," he explained.

"Lay out my gear, draw some water, start a fire and make the bed. Also, where's the officers' mess?"

O'Mara shook his head. "I dunno, sir. The last officer, he ate here, off'n his knees."

"Do they call this an Army post?"

O'Mara didn't know. "It's same as the places the people live in, though."

"Sir."

"Sir." O'Mara was out of practice.

"What people?"

"All of 'em...sir. The homesteaders, the ranchers. We come crost 'em on patrol."

"Do you patrol regularly?"

"Lately we have . . . sir." O'Mara shivered once.

"Why only lately?"

"No troubles till lately, I giss, sir. Mescaleras comin'."

"Mescaleros? Indians?" A light flew across Kittredge's eyes. An eager, greedy light.

"Apaches, sir."

"Well, we'll handle 'em." Kittredge tossed a rubber cape around his shoulders and went out. He found Dr. Canning in the feed shed with Claxton. A trouserless man lay on a board table, moaning and rolling his head from side to side. One naked leg was shattered to purpling pulp; the rotting flesh stank and the gray-green-white bone was partially exposed. The doctor was humming a tune, preparing swabs and offering whiskey, all at the same time. Some grain from a sack on a shelf over the table trickled onto the wounded leg, and the doctor clucked his tongue and picked it out, piece by piece.

"Mistuh Kittredge, seems last night, seh, theh was gun-shootin' neah-by."

Kittredge drilled his eyes at Claxton. "Why didn't you report this?"

"Happens all the time, sir. Just a few drunken Apaches."

"This man's hurt!"

"Oh, yessir." Claxton peered at the wound. "Badly, I'd say."

THE RAIN snare-drummed the roof, the man on the table moaned and the doctor coughed. He was unbuttoning his cuffs, still humming. "Come out heah fuh m'health, Mistuh Kittredge, m'lovely, chahmin' wife havin' depahted this uth in Ca'lina." He found a scalpel in his bag and began honin it on a boot. "Takes aftuh m'chahmin' daughtuh, I might add, suh." He held the scalpel to the light and narrowed his eyes. "If yuh'll pay call some evenin', suh, we shall drink whiskey an' talk of old times, though"—he swung his eyes at Kittredge—"you, suh, by yoh 'appearance, cannot have been in the late unpleasantness between thuh states." He turned to the patient.

He coughed, the scalpel jerked and the patient shrieked. "Sahgunt, pour mo' whiskey into his gullet."

Kittredge walked to the window and back. "I realize, Claxton, that I'm only the new commanding officer, but sometime when you have a moment, I'd like to hear how this man was shot, and why patrol actions have been maintained only recently, and why there is no officers' mess."

The patient shrieked again, Claxton administered additional whiskey and Dr. Canning carved away dead flesh with long, sweeping strokes. He was still humming,

"Big Dan Frame . . . drank the Mississippi . . . Big Dan Frame . . . drank the river dry . . ." He threw flesh into a bucket and went on with his work... *"Big Dan Frame . . . drank 'er to the bottom . . . an' then he swallered up the whole durn sky . . .* Hold steady, now... yuh'll retain yo' laig . . ."

"It's just this, sir." Claxton paused to let another shriek tear through the man's teeth. "The Blackmer boys were more or less a civilian responsibility, and we let 'em alone. You did right, last night, because there was U. S. mail aboard. But that's the first time they ever tried their hand against the government."

"What's that got to do with Apaches?"

"Blackmer didn't like them no more'n he liked bankers, or homesteaders with cash under the carpet. He kept 'em out, but lately he'd been out of the Big Bend, and the Mescaleros came back. They made a pass at the post last night, and Fertig, here, was on the gate."

"Why haven't you been able to round 'em up?"

Claxton shrugged heavily. "It's a big country, sir. No man's bigger than all of it. We've searched, right enough, but they've always got away."

"Don't they hole up anywhere?"

"Near Satan's Stairs, sometimes. But not always."

Fertig's bubbling scream rose and fell twice; Dr. Canning was busy with catgut and needles.

"Where's Satan's Stairs?"

"West, a day. A mountain comin' right outa the desert."

Dr. Canning threaded catgut neatly, holding one end in his teeth. He glanced at Kittredge owlishly. "That, suh, is wheah Big Dan Frame lives, I do believe." He bent over the now unconscious Fertig and dipped a needle.

"Claxton, tell me: who in the hell is Frame?"

Claxton pulled at his chin thoughtfully. "Well, sir...he's the best man in the west."

"Allus has been," the doctor blurted.

"An outlaw?" Kittredge was stern.

"Well, sir...it's hard to say." Claxton frowned in concentration. "He rode the Big Bend some years ago, and...well, they say that sometimes he rides again, that he'll never die."

Dr. Canning snapped, "He nevuh will!"

Kittredge's lip lifted. "Are you trying to tell me that a ghost—"

A scream sliced up from the table; Fertig was conscious again.

"About the officers' mess, sir. Our last C. O. used the billet for that, and there's no appropriation for construction of one." He looked at the ceiling. "Unless, of course, the lieutenant wishes to mess under the fly with the men."

"Certainly not!"

Claxton lowered his eyes. "Then, sir, I suggest—"

"O'Mara will serve me in the billet. Claxton, this man obviously cannot ride. Claxton, that leaves seventeen for duty. Twelve will ride with me at dawn and run down these annoyances and eliminate them."

"As the lieutenant says. But if I may recommend, sir, that in this rain their tracks will be washed away?"

"When does the rain stop?"

Dr. Canning replied, "Nevuh, it seems. This, suh, is ouah sto'my season." He slapped the bandaged leg, gave Fertig more whiskey and buttoned on his cuffs. "I shall visit yuh soon, son. Stay quiet, don' get in any pokuh games an' write a lettuh home."

KITTREDGE led the first command across the clay flats at a walk, guiding on the immense, haze-shrouded mountain that was Satan's Stairs. He knew nothing about the country, and a good deal less about fighting Indians, and his knowledge of men was no greater than what he'd been told by the officers who had been over him. But he felt possessed of dynamic powers on that rain-rinsed morning, and he rode with chin high and eyes glittering, secure in the strength contained in his two Colts and the carbine in the saddle boot. Claxton had told him that the Mescaleros were the tribal tatters of a nation now on reservations, renegade remnants that plundered for spite and not for war; that burned and raped and stole for the sheer joy of it, and not for any gain or for prestige.

It took all day to cross the damp flatlands, and twice they had to swim swollen streams that boomed between sandy banks and sent the horses, kicking, for a hundred yards or more. All the sunshine seemed to have been sucked from the skies by the slatting rain and wind, and Kittredge cursed the day he'd joined up, and he cursed the day he'd taken a commission; and in particular did he curse the west country and all the people in it. Ghosts! Indeed....

They made a dry camp by some cottonwoods and slept miserably; and the second morning on the march they filed into the first passes of Satan's Stairs. There were some disturbances in the clay underfoot, huge scrawls, unevenly spaced, that might have been made by branches being washed

down from the timber above. But they had passed no branches all that day, and Kittredge called O'Mara forward.

"Seen that before?"

O'Mara had. "Sign o' some sort...sir."

"Whose?" Kittredge put the question as if he was testing O'Mara's knowledge instead of his own.

"Too big for ponies, sir."

"I suppose you think it was Big Dan?"

O'Mara crossed himself hurriedly. "Don't say that, sir."

"I'll say what I please." They pressed on into the passes, and just before noon they picked up other signs, fresher signs, and smaller. Kittridge dismounted and squatted over them, trying to decide what they were, and what had caused them. They had come into the shoulder of the Stairs from the north, and disappeared southeast around a stony setback laced with tangle root. The cold sand had held their shape firmly.

O'Mara volunteered, "Ponies." He seemed relieved. "That'll be Apache."

"Sir."

"Sir."

KITTREDGE stopped fumbling. "What was that?" Then he saw it himself, a flicker of brown in the green of the timber. It came and went, like a shutter, ahead of them at the base of the wall. Kittredge turned to the mounted column and saw in the set, tense faces a common opinion of his tactics. Words darted across the front of his mind, words from a past that had seemed, until now, very recent; but the words were dim, as if anchored 'way back in time: Don't let anyone suck you in, Kittredge. You can't swing the west by its tail, you know . . . Words from the lips of a lynx-whiskered old major who had signed Kittredge's orders for the west. Words . . .

A blur of white showed and retreated where the flicker of brown had appeared, three hundred yards up the trail by the wall. A high babble of voices cracked the tight silence and dull hoofs thudded and a single voice shrilled high and falsetto and there was a shot.

It rattled through the branches of the pine.

O'Mara began circling out of line to go back, sweat springing out on his neck. His mouth was making motions but he was wordless. Gradually the file buckled and fell apart. The thudding was coming nearer and the babbling was louder and then they came into view, riding fast, lying along outstretched pony necks, headbands bobbing, faces contorted with satanic glee. Another shot smacked and a fluff of smoke whipped from a pony.

Kittredge sprang to the nearest rider and swung a fist and drove it into the man's ribs. He snarled savagely and the man reined down. A third shot slocked into the man's body and he doubled over the pommel and the horse side-stepped and crow-hopped once and flew down the backtrail after the others.

The hoofs were like drumfire and the yelling filled the timber and Kittredge lunged for his horse and missed. The animal crashed through the brush and raced after the rest and hurdled the tossed body of the shot man and was out of sight.

"Guess how many?"

O'Mara pursed his mouth. "Mebbe twenty-five . . . mebbe thirty. Sir."

"That's a lot." The greed showed in Kittredge's eyes. He threw a leg over his saddle and led out, riding faster than he had been. The trail rounded the setback and followed a cliff overlooking a wooded valley in the foothills. Above, the upper passes were obscured in chill haze and low-streaking scud. At the end of the cliff the trail vanished into a ravine that led upward toward the timber.

The pony prints could no longer be seen on the rocky places, though they reappeared occasionally where mud had slipped from the high side of the trail. In the ravine they disappeared entirely. Kittredge went in at a walk, standing in his stirrups, butt off the saddle a little.

The rush and tumble of the wind was like ghosts hurling insults at one another.

Then they left the ravine and rode into the timber and the sign was showing again. It cut the pine needles and had broken some twigs and was there for anyone to see—as though the men who had made it had no thought of pursuit.

The wind was sighing more lightly, the air was clearing and visibility spread openly and far. Beyond the timber stand the wall of a second shoulder showed clearly. They trotted through the silences,

only the *clink-jingle* of harness sounding, and by mid-afternoon were near the foot of the wall.

Unbelievably, the sun came out. It was sallow yellow and it was cold, but it was sunlight and it burned the mists away from the crest of the wall. A thread-slim goat path scratched its surface, zig-zagging.

They stopped, and the silence was a physical weight on their ears. Kittredge dismounted under a tall pine and stretched his legs. He fumbled for his leather case, wanting a smoke.

"What was that?" a man asked.

Kittredge seized a knot-stump on the pine, reached for a low branch and drew himself up. He used his knees mightily and went like an eel for thirty feet and wrapped his legs around the foliate trunk and snagged out both revolvers.

THE flat-riding Mescalero with the white headband came first and Kittredge fired directly down and forward of the pony and the man flipped back and gyrated and spun into the brush. The yelling stopped and the attack collapsed and riders slipped to the ground and spread into the brush. Kittredge risked another shot at a crouching figure with a tan breechclout. The figure sprang to its feet and fell forward, kicking. Another man crawled toward it and Kittredge shot him between the shoulder blades. Then the others were scurrying like great shiny dogs through the pine needles and scrub, snuffling and searching. Kittredge still had the advantage of surprise, and he played it with three more shots. One-third of the attackers had been cut down. Kittredge reloaded.

Then a wide-chested man fired up at him from behind a trunk. He yelled a warning and fired again and his second bullet ripped Kittredge's sleeve. Then they all were potting at him, spreading out, preparing to encircle the pine. White splits of sap wood appeared miraculously in the trunk, and Kittredge pulled himself higher. A bullet snarled through smoke-laced air and burned his shoulder. He fired back and missed; and fired again and heard a cry.

He emptied one revolver and stuck it into his shirt and cocked the other one.

Hoofs thrummed in the distance, growing louder. A whoop sounded but it was not an Indian's voice; and then O'Mara's set face flickered through the trunks on the back-trail and he threw off and sank from sight. Kittredge barely saw the others behind him.

The Mescaleros darted away from the high pine and folded themselves into the ground, hunting these new targets. Carbines ripped like cloth tearing and smoke trails sliced through the timber. The Mescaleros waited, wanting sure targets.

Kittredge, circling the trunk now with long arms, laid his revolver on his wrist, sighted, aimed and squeezed off another shot. It struck a dark head just above the ear, and the head jerked to one side and was still.

O'Mara called something and the carbine fire started again, from two directions. The Mescaleros began a slow retreat toward the trail leading to the wall, toward their nervous ponies. Kittredge's lip rolled up in white-toothed arrogance and he emptied the second revolver, then reloaded.

Three quick shots clipped into the trunk; a fourth cracked across his shin, cutting his boot.

O'Mara yelled something else, and the carbine fire came closer. Kittredge could see alkali-smudged blue shirts melting through the brown and green timber carpet. He could delineate features and recognize names he already knew: Butts, Kilgore, Keenan. . . .

The Mescaleros fired a last ragged volley, leapt to their frightened ponies and wheeled toward the wall. Kittredge slid down the trunk and hit the ground in time to bump into O'Mara, stumble, rise and run to the edge of the timber. There were others in blue all around him, firing evenly, firing slowly. Firing well, from the look of the riderless ponies fighting toward the goat-path on the wall.

"Only four left!" O'Mara was shouting. He didn't resemble a pop-eyed body servant any longer; he was hot to the eyes with happy anger.

I'll put you in for corporal, Kittredge promised himself.

"Three now!"

And then those last three were skittering up the trail, and the timber went

silent and there was no sound save the gasping of lungs and the contented muttering of men who felt that they were, at last, on the safe side of a long nightmare. They were joking in low voices, laughing at one another. Their voices came louder, and presently Kittredge was talking to O'Mara. "Nicely done, that. What brought you back?"

A shrug, an exhale. An embarrassed tug at trousers. "We were alone, no one was chasin' any longer. Then we heard the lieutenant's revolver." He spat dryly. "So we came back."

"I'm glad you did." But that was all Kittredge would allow. "If I hadn't shinnied that gummy mast, there, you'd all be dead now." He counted the bodies with his eyes. "We'll plant these, then turn for home." He noticed the weather for the first time: it was heavy with mist and the brooding grumble of thunder was above them.

"We can leave 'em lay, sir. Those others'll creep back and take 'em in."

Kittredge studied O'Mara a moment. "You know a lot, don't you?"

"Only what I have to . . . sir." Another shrug. "One man can't know it all, though, not never."

"All right. Mount up."

They rode out of the passes and onto the flat land in the stiff silence that follows elation. Twice did Kittredge pass those huge scrawls in the clay, scrawls that resembled the hoofprints of a horse that must have been forty hands high. But he did see storm-broken branches by some cottonwoods, and he concluded that the wind had dragged the limbs over the clay. Forty hands, indeed!

CHAPTER THREE

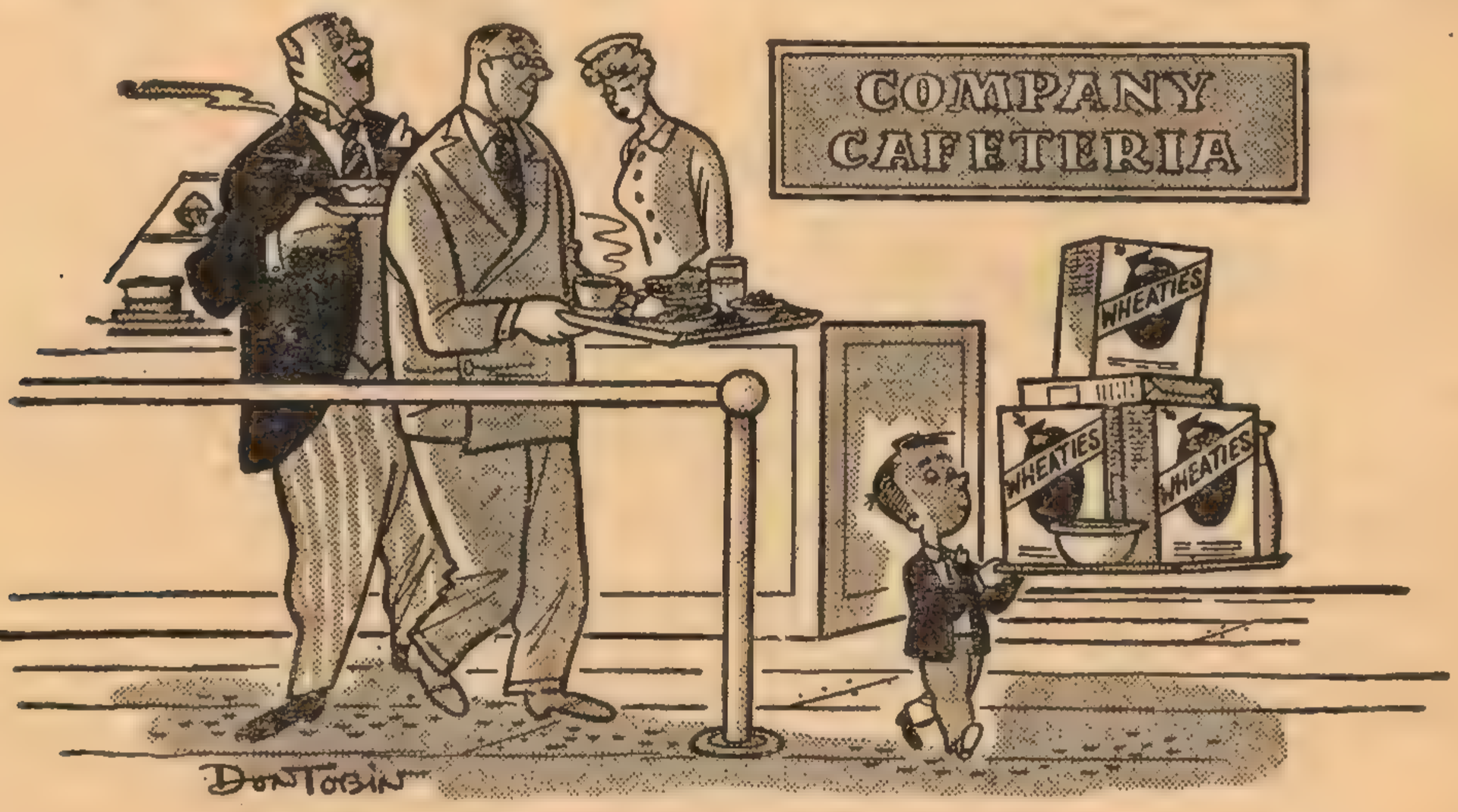
Meet Big Dan Frame

THREE days later Kittredge rode into Crockett's Furnace with Claxton at the reins of the rig, his shoulder and shin aching still but not too sorely. He had already forwarded his report of the skirmish; it would look good in files. He hoped the lynx-whiskered old major would read it.

"Claxton, why in hell didn't someone do that before—chase 'em onto their own grounds?"

Claxton shook leather and whupped to the team. He answered, "It was always considered too much of a risk, sir. Odds on—that way."

"Risk! That's what men get paid for,



"There's a man who's going places in this company."

ANOTHER up-and-coming young man is Boston Braves' Al Dark. Wheaties eater for over 10 years, he was voted "Rookie of the Year" in '48! Famous training dish—these 100% whole wheat flakes, milk and fruit. Real "he-man" nourishment plus second-helping flavor. Had your Wheaties today? "Breakfast of Champions"!

to take risks." Kittredge, himself, was feeling forty hands high that day. The sky was a light gray and there was a hint of rain, but the air was clean and the road was firm and up ahead, not far, was the Furnace and Miss Sue Canning.

Sergeant Claxton suppressed an impulse to expound upon the difference between calculated risk and headlong risk; between counter-attrition and foolhardy attack. Between exposing most of a command in a defensive action; and saving it, strengthening it, using it in the quick counter-thrusts that would eventually chop down the Apache and save some soldiers. Three soldiers had died in the timber, twenty-five per cent of the patrol.

Claxton said, "O'Mara did a nice piece of work, sir."

"Oh, yes." Kittredge sniffed a few times, as if annoyed at mention of the name. "But he wouldn't have had a chance to do anything if I hadn't been in that pine, holding 'em off."

Claxton could have told Kittredge that that was tactics, on-the-spot retreat tactics designed to draw the enemy from a meeting engagement into an ambush. Incredible luck had nothing to do with the basic values involved. Claxton, though, did not tell Kittredge those things because Kittredge did not seem to him to be the type who would accept or consider them.

"Town's crowded, sir."

"Saturday."

They rolled past the store fronts to the stable and turned the rig in.

Claxton was after rations and beer for the post; Kittredge let him walk up the street alone. Then he strolled toward the Furnace's only cross-street, guessing that Dr. Canning must live on or near it. He passed the New York Store and the Okay Harness Shop, and was passing the saloon when a beard-bristled man with a vacant grin on his loose lips lurched out to the plankwalk and leaned against a post.

A man coming the other way said, "Better go home, Alfie."

"Shuh . . . shuh . . ." Alfie started to leave the post, then spotted the twin revolvers on Kittredge's belt. His red-lidded eyes lighted and he pushed himself forward, crabbing out a hand to feel one of the Colts.

"Aside!" Kittredge warned him.

"Ain't seen one o' them in . . ." Alfie shook his head dumbly, trying to remember when he'd last been so close to a service revolver. His thin hand closed on the butt and tugged.

Kittredge smashed a fist on Alfie's fingers and Alfie yanked them back, eyes hurt and quizzical. Some men were stopping, half-grinning, and to them Alfie mumbled, "I was just a-feelin' of it . . ." He moved his eyes to Kittredge. "Looten'nt, it's years since I handled one o' them . . . I ain't got money to buy . . ." His eyes wavered reminiscently, wetly.

"Go on home, Alfie," the man repeated. He was sidling between Alfie and Kittredge. "Alfie's just an' ol' veteran with nothin' to do." He watched Alfie sway up the plankwalk. Then he gazed judgingly at Kittredge, picking him apart with his eyes. "Town sort of takes care of him. Who d'you think you are, Big Dan?"

Defiance lashed from Kittredge's eyes. "Spit that out! I'm sick of it!"

Someone laughed. "Luh-tennant mus' think he's boss out yere."

"Shut up!" Kittredge stabbed with his eyes at the man in front of him. "I smack anybody who reaches for my guns—even your wonderful Frame . . . Boss, hey?"

"Mister, Alfie's addled since the war. Thinks he's still at Sharpsburg."

"Then he ought to go back there." Kittredge nodded curtly. "Stand aside."

He shouldered the man off the planks and the man stumbled and recovered and jumped in front of him. "Mister, you ain't Big Dan, you never will be—"

Kittredge's knuckles caught him smartly and sent him spinning off the planks. He lay in the dust, jaws loose, mouth stained crimson. Kittredge placed a palm on each revolver and waited for someone to move a hand. No one did.

THEN he pushed throuh the resentful group and strode fast toward the cross-street. Two men were just around the corner, chewing toothpicks and regarding the gray skies. A bump of thunder trembled down the morning.

Kittredge asked, "Can you tell me where Dr. Canning lives?"

"That-away. The first painted house."

The man was a rancher whose prayers for water were about to be answered. But he needed more help than that. "Got a minute, Lieutenant?" He stuck out a huge hand. "Talbot's m'name. I run the Bar Circle W, out o' town."

Kittredge paused a moment before shaking, even as the stage driver had hesitated to shake. Then he gripped Talbot's palm and squeezed hard and let go. "So you run the Bar Circle W."

Talbot's eyes narrowed; he was sweating. "Thing is, mister—?"

"Kittredge," he said impatiently.

"I'm havin' trouble with m'herds. Them 'Paches been bustin' fence, an' the herds get loose. They ain't none been run off yet 'cause they're too slow for the 'Paches. But I been wonderin'."

"Wondering what?" Kittredge was thinking about Sue Canning, not herds.

"If you could lend a hand an' help round up strays. We're tryin' to build up this country." He coughed roughly. "We 'ppreciate what you done at Satan's—"

"Thanks, but we're here to protect government property and lives, that's all. We are not, Mr. Talbot, cattle snatchers for private enterprise." He nodded, set his shoulders high and went down the street. All the way to the doctor's white-painted house he felt their eyes boring into his back.

He marched up the flagged path, knocked loudly and folded his arms.

From far back in the house somewhere a deep voice was plucking lazily at the words to a song he'd heard before: *"Big Dan Frame . . . ate a hoss an' colluh . . . Big Dan Frame . . . ate the buggy fuh dessert . . . Big Dan Frame . . . chewed a silver dolluh . . ."* The voice came closer, and the door opened "Why, suh!" Dr. Canning admitted him with a bow. "An honuh, suh, indeed." The doctor led the way to a small, papered room that had been furnished from the New York Store, and there was a tinge of jasmine there. Kittredge accepted a glass of bourbon and lifted it. "Health."

"Yo's, suh, though m'patients could do without it 'ccasionally."

"Doctor, tell me once and for all—who is he?"

"Suh?"

"Frame! Big Dan! I'm sick of him! Is he alive? Dead? A ghost. . . . ?"

"Sho'ly, suh, you don' believe in spook-folks?" Dr. Canning tasted his drink, and it was good. "Dan'l—or Dan, as they call him—may be dead, but he may not be." He smiled admiringly. "We never know, suh, we never know. He hasn't been seen, f'sho', in some while. But some folks claim they have, indeed, seen him."

"Who was he? A giant? A killer?"

Dr. Canning pouched his lips. "A spirit, suh, of the West country. A livin' man once, an' maybe even yet livin'. He was boss of the Bend, an' still is, as far's anyone can see."

Light steps sounded, there was a rustle of silk, and Sue Canning was in the room, eyes large on Kittredge. He bowed precisely. "Your eternal servant, miss."

"Mr. Kittredge," she acknowledged solemnly.

The doctor coughed hurriedly, stuttered something about bandages to pack, and bumbled from the room.

Clay Kittredge said, "I told you I'd come."

"You're not too busy?"

"At the moment, no." He grinned broadly. "I just cleaned up a situation that nobody wanted to touch. Up in the Stairs."

"Yes, I heard." She listened to the thunder growling in the distance. "Those poor men."

"The Mescaleros?"

"No, the three troopers."

"Oh?" He drew his hands to his seams. "That was necessary, I'm afraid."

"And I'm afraid that it was not. Really, Mr. Kittredge."

"Clay is my name. Won't you call me that?"

She drew a breath and looked him over and, suddenly, smiled. "I will on one condition."

"Name it."

"That you remove your hat."

Embarrassment shot through him and he felt it heat his neck, his face, his forehead. He tore off his hat. "My deepest apologies, Miss Sue."

"Please sit down, if you have time." She sat opposite him, studying him openly. "Do you really like it out here, Mr. —Clay?"

"Yes. Do you?"

"Very much."

"That's good. I own it."

Amazement arced her brows. "Do you really?"

"Seems no one else'll run it, so I'm the man."

She shook her head. "You're a very odd person, Clay."

"How?"

"You do sure things, but you're not very sure of yourself. As if you really don't believe that you owned the west, after all."

"I've taken over this end of it." He spun his hatbrim through his fingers nervously. "You're right, though, about not being sure of myself. I'm not familiar with drawing room etiquette. I do better outside."

"I thought the Academy taught those things."

"I didn't attend the Academy." He leaned forward a bit. "Until last month, I was a dismounted sergeant on strike duty in Pittsburgh. My squadron commander took a notion to the way I did things and put me up for a commission. When it came through I was shipped out here."

"I see. And you think you own it?"

He stood up. "Sue, I have a right to think that."

SHE gave a little laugh, as if amused at something that did not recur to her often. "No one has except Big Dan. He's the real boss, Clay, not you or anyone else."

He felt the blood course hotly through him, felt his neck muscles tighten. "Big Dan!" The words scraped through his teeth. "A story for kids! You all talk about him, to excuse your faults, but no one ever can get him and lick him!"

"I suppose you can?" Even her eyes were taunting him.

"Yes—me!" He threw out his arms. "Satan's Stairs—a weather-busted mountain not ten miles square! To everyone around here it looks like a hunk of the Rockies." He punched his chest. "I know the place—I just cleaned it out!"

Her laugh lanced him. "A handful of night riders. Why don't you get Dan, man of words but not of deeds?" She laughed again. "You talk too much, Clay." Her laughter rose a little higher.

"I? Talk?" Visions of Owen Blackmer crossed his mind, along with a memory of being locked in a high pine while Mescaleros were surrounding him for the kill.

"Clay . . . listen." She smoothed her gown carefully, trying to think of a way to tell him. "He's better than the whole west, or any person in it. He *is* the west, don't you see? Nobody wants to forget him, because he's like John Henry, he's got to be alive in men's hearts and we all hope that he is alive! He was terrific in all he did when he rode the Bend, and nobody's done better, and you can't either." She sighed. "You see, Clay, you have to learn to ride the land, before you can ride the sky . . ."

"I'll drag him back by his spur straps!" Clay clapped on his hat and marched to the door.

"You?" She was behind him, laughing again. "You couldn't, neither you nor any fifty men!"

He whirled to face her. "Boss! Hiding out all by himself, letting folks babble silly verses about him, too old to come back and show himself!"

"If he shows himself to you, Clay, you might not come back." She was solemn, now, and the laughter was gone.

"I'll come back—as top man, and they'll be singing some songs about me!"

* * *

It was late afternoon when he and Claxton got to Camp Kiowa, and Kittredge called for O'Mara. "Saddle that horse of mine. I've got an appointment with a ghost."

O'Mara looked at him swiftly, wondering what the lieutenant had had to drink in town.

Clay Kittredge rode west toward the Stairs in the harsh twilight, face down to the wind; he rode alone across the flats, mind set vise-like on the man in Satan's Stairs. What had Claxton said about Dan Frame? That he hadn't molested the Mescaleros, because they kept things stirred up, and Dan was notably restless, the soul of a reckless man.

It was cold, that night; and Kittredge woke shivering in the dawn wind.

He rode through the rain slowly, his

He rode slowly through the rain, his horse splashing mud-high. Satan's Stairs appeared ahead and vanished in a gust of rain. He was soggy to the skin and cold inside and angry all over. He growled to himself, still defiant. It was dark when he reached the first passes leading into the Stairs, and a howling noise was echoing through the ravines, rising and falling, ululating like the call of an agony-racked wolf.

"Is that you, Frame?" Kittredge yelled.

He spat against the twilight. The howling rose to a steady wail that seemed to come from the catacombs of destiny itself; it pierced Kittredge's soul and took some of the anger from him and left him just a little uncertain. Then it went low, throbbing indistinctly on the night wind, and then it stopped altogether.

Kittredge told himself that he hadn't noticed it, that it had been the raucous wind batting down through the timber. Thunder exploded like mortar shot and bellowed down the darkness; Kittredge's horse whipped around in frantic fright and bucked wildly and Kittredge bent forward, felt the animal jerk and whirl, and lost his saddle and cart-wheeled into the night and struck painfully. The horse clattered up toward the timber; thunder smashed again, and the sound of hoofs was gone. . . .

Kittredge came to with a savage headache. His scalp was cut and his shoulder burned painfully and he was dizzy and sick and had a humming sensation in his skull. Lightning whitened the night and flicked out; thunder tumbled low overhead and boomed into the south.

He got off his back and sat up, and after a moment started to rise. A strange sound was in the wind now, almost like a human voice, and it seemed to be daring him forward. He got to his feet, steadier of head in the driving wind, and managed to find the trail.

The strange sound was closer, was not far above him, and it quirted his conscience like an evil memory.

KITTREDGE stumbled up the clay-slippery trail, reaching for rocks, for hand holds, for balance; he cringed to a

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flare of lightning and held his breath as thunder beat across the night.

Lightning smacked the skies again and left them a sheet of yellow, and Kittredge saw outsized stumps and limbs and the twisted remains of trees. He slogged on, breathing hard, fighting for footholds, wild eyes probing for the sight of a frightened horse. The rain was a steady gunfire against his skin, his ears, his eyes; against his brain and his conscience and his very being. The howling started, banshee-like and alto and persistent, slatting down from the timber passes with the zero slam of direct-fire canister. Kittredge braced himself to a stop, and for the first time in a long time he felt fear.

Fear sickened his guts and jarred his heart and left his mouth dried-out; fear lanced his lungs and left him airless, struck his stomach and twisted it tight. He heard a crackling above the howling, a crackling that grew stronger and larger and louder; and he went deaf to the slam of thunder; and he bent from the hips beneath its weight, and he straightened to the blind-white flare of lightning.

Tree limbs lunged at him, clawed for him, made him dodge aside; branches dipped and rattled, stung by the driving rain. The world went black and he walked alone, feeling his way with his hands; he felt the trail rise under his boots and he knew that he'd left the pass.

He came out into timber that smelled of cedar and pine and spruce, and he guessed he was on the trail that circled around the valley and led into the ravine. He knelt then, sucking for breath, and then he rose and called. He shouted for his horse, he tried to whistle against the wind, he screamed in rising rage. There was no answer but the wind, and the rain, and the crack of lightning off to the west. . . .

He came, at last, to the ravine, and he went through it on creeping boots.

He left the ravine and entered the pines, hands forward, eyes half-shut to the stinging rain.

Lightning slashed the skies again and rocketed over the night and blasted the storm of whiteness and showed the timber bright and dripping and waving and thick.

Kittredge flung himself to one side as a heavy spar descended on him and chocked into the mud and lay there. It had seemed, for an instant, as if it had been a huge human arm; but it must have been a limb ripped from its socket and blown to the ground. He stooped, feeling for it, and couldn't find it; and rose, arms out-hung, and heard the howl again.

The noise was a dirgeful scream, low-keyed like the sob of a sad violin, yet steady as the turn of a dry-axled wheel. It was half-human, to Kittredge's tortured ears, and he swung his shoulders left and right and all around, waiting, challenging, defying, daring.

Something hit him softly in the ribs and he struggled for leg-balance and got it and braced himself that way, still waiting. He thought he saw a chunk of wood near his feet—a chunk thrown by the wind, or by— A shriek split his head apart and white light blinded him and something tore into his stomach and knocked him flat and left him lying in the greasy pine needles.

Thunder's artillery fired along the heavens in irregular battery-rote.

Kittredge climbed to his feet and lifted out both revolvers and held them pointed at right angles from his hips. He heard his own, high, falsetto voice screech:

"You filthy son! You filthy hound! Get out of here!"

The sound of a wind that was born on a storm was laughter in his ears; was mockery in his mind. Damn you! He slammed off a shot at nothing; lightning lifted the darkness and hung whitely.

"You!" Kittredge saw what he thought was a man, an immense man, a man with leg-round arms and tree-thick legs and a head the size of a barrel. A man who appeared to be camouflaged in branches and twigs and leaves. A man who was leering, crouching, reaching. . . .

HE IMAGINED that he must have shouted: "Big Dan Frame!" Because the very words returned to him on the reckless wind: Big Dan Frame! *Big Dan Frame! Big Dan!*

Lightning burst and Kittredge shrieked and fired at the gargantuan thing that was reaching for him. He punched at a branch and it was cold on his skin and he punched and punched again; he went

blind in a smear of sparks as something hatcheted his head and then he was on the ground, flopping helplessly.

Thunder detonated and rain flayed and lightning streaked down the skies.

Kittredge came to his aching knees; to one foot, to the other. He stood, revolvers ready, eyes hideous. He attempted to steady himself, to caution himself, to say to himself, Clay Kittredge, you weak sister. This is just a tree you're up against. No man could ever be that big. Shoot it!

The Colt shot it.

. . . See, Clay, nothing but a tree. But are those eyes?

"Aside!" he choked. The pair of lights —gray ovals leaned closer and there seemed to be a mouth grimacing and then a whip ripped his cheek in two and he was choking on wells of salt blood. He pressed off another shot.

The arms of the thing ahead of him flung upward in disdain and fell flapping in helpless glee.

He stepped forward . . . left . . . right . . . left . . . right . . . and planted a huge, hard fist into the thing and felt the shock go up into his biceps.

A swift something dropped past his eyes and collided with his teeth and sprung his jaw-joint and knocked him onto his shoulders and left him twirling, muscleless.

He curled his legs under him, hooped forward and fired two shots from each revolver. The bullets clipped into something that sounded like flesh, and Kittredge pulled both triggers again.

He heard the bullets strike.

He threw himself off his knees and waded toward the light-gray oval eyes and squeezed off the last three shots from each gun and hurled the empty weapons at the shape and then started using his fists and his boots and his knees.

His jaw went numb to the impact of a wallop and he staggered backward, arms milling; he threw his weight forward and went in reaching, diving, swinging; lightning glared and the rain went silver and Kittredge flung a spurred boot at the thing and he swore he heard laughter break across the storm.

Something smashed into his ribs and something else caught him behind one ear and something else plowed into his belt buckle and he folded into the ground and lay twitching, kicking, bleeding. He could taste the blood on his tongue, in his jaws; could smell it in his nostrils, could feel it in his shirt.

His lungs were twin furnaces; his stomach ruptured of compactness, his throat on fire. He stared upward, seeking the cooling wetness of rain on his wounds, and saw a tremendous man-form toppling down on him, filling the night, crushing him. He yelped and rolled aside and got on one knee and pushed with a foot and struck blindly out.

The descending form took the trousers off his legs and the skin off his knee-caps and spanked smartly on his toes and black-jacked his head and peeled off part of his scalp and catapulted him for twenty feet and left him unconscious.

Thunder startled the living, and passed across the dead; thunder and rain and lightning rent the night and lashed the land and left blood, and abjectness, and terror in their wake. . . .

* * *

Clay Kittredge was crawling heavily, crawling uncertainly . . . Crawling. . . .

Anson Talbot found him first, and instinctively drew a gun. The creature on hands and knees didn't look safe, at first.

Talbot was out searching for strays, but down under the distances were other men searching too, and he was surprised that a gunshot hadn't given warning of the raid.

He threw off and came to Kittredge and holstered his gun. "Mescaleros?"

Kittredge swung his jaws back and forth; he allowed himself to be helped to his feet and given water. Then Talbot handed him a flask, and he drank gratefully from it.

"Not Mescaleros," he groaned. His jaws were swollen blue and his shirt was hard-crusted with brown blood; his naked, hide-scraped legs were plastered with mud, and the scalp flap, dangling at an angle, had stuck that way.

"My God, what was it?"

"I don't know." Kittredge leaned against Talbot wearily, all strength spent. He felt as if he'd been flung from a nightmare into pain-shot reality. Or had it been a nightmare?

"Well, man . . . here, I'll help you mount. We'll walk home now."

"I think a tree fell on me."

Talbot gripped the reins and pulled the horse around. "A tree?" He was doubtful. "There was no wind strong enough last night to blow down a tree. Not a tree in the passes, leastways." He looked keenly at the huddled figure in the saddle. "That where you were?"

Kittredge nodded. "Thought I might track down this . . . fugitive . . . Big Dan Frame."

"Maybe you did, man . . . maybe you did."

CROCKETT'S FURNACE was closer than Camp Kiowa, and that's where Talbot took him. He walked the horse past wondering faces and turned into the cross-street and helped Kittredge to the ground. They staggered into the white-painted house with the green trim, and Kittredge saw Dr. Canning's questioning face, and fainted.

He came to between warm linen sheets, and Miss Sue Canning was sitting nearby, watching him.

"Clay . . ." She arranged the blanket and felt his forehead.

"How long—have—I—?"

"Been here? Two days." She fingered his wrists, pressing the pulses. "We haven't done all you wanted, yet, because we wanted to be sure you meant it."

"All I wanted?"

She palmed his hair back from his temples, idly, affectionately. "You were raising a ruckus, at first. About giving Alfie Weir one of your Colts, and sending someone named Fertig to hospital at Omaha, and making someone called O'Mara a corporal." She wrinkled her nose at him. "You also want to help Mr. Talbot find his—"

"Me?"

"You. Claxton's been here. He'll be back."

Outside, the weather was clearing, the rain had stopped, though the skies were still oily and gray. A far, far mutter of thunder sounded to westward, from the direction of Satan's Stairs.

The doctor's voice began in song: *"Big Dan Frame . . . wore a mountain for a locket . . . Big Dan Frame . . . put a city in his pocket. . . "* He knocked and came in. "Well, m'boy!" He cocked his head this way and that, sizing up his patient. "Yo' resemblance to muh late lamented daddy is strong indeed, suh! Strong indeed . . . he retuhned from the recent unpleasantness between the states, full of honnuhs an' whiskey, an' bearin' face an' head wounds much the same."

"I don't envy him, Doctor."

Sue's cool hand stroked Kittredge's cheeks, temples, forehead. The room receded and things spun dizzily and he sank into the slumber of wrung-out fatigue. . . .

It was afternoon when he awoke, and Sue was still there. They looked long at each other; and then Kittredge found his tongue. "Don't you want to leave?"

"Not especially. Not since you learned to remove your hat."

"Oh, yes, indeed." He put a hand to his head and winced. "I had it removed for me, I guess." He half-shut his eyes and started to ask a question. He couldn't speak it, so he conjured up another way of putting it, and at last said, "You've got to tell me, because I don't know."

"About Big Dan?" She smoothed his hair and rubbed his wrists. "You've found out more than I know." Her tone, like the light in her eyes, had also changed. "You went into the Stairs to do something impossible, for me. . . . I thank you for that."

"What do you mean—impossible?" He was incredulous.

"You didn't bring him back in a bag, did you?"

"Well, no. He, or whatever, or whoever, beat the starch out of me." He held her fingers, completely contented. "But tell me—do you think—that it was really—he?"

"I like to think that it was, Clay. Do you know why?"

Kittredge didn't, and told her so.

She said, "Because he brought you down to human size, and for that I'm in his debt. . . . So let's believe that he's up there in the Stairs, forever."

"Forever," Clay Kittredge breathed, and heard the thunder in the west, and listened in respectful silence. He'd learned to ride the land, and to let the sky alone.

THE END

Sam knew his hair was gray and his blood red, but he didn't reckon he had gold in his guts at the fateful hour—

WHEN THE COYOTE LAUGHED!

Sam Pease had long dreamed of the things he would do when he found gold

By JOHN PRESCOTT

IN THE lands beyond the Sabine River there's a saying which holds that a person passing beyond the borders of ordinary human experience has "heard the coyote bark." He has heard, perhaps, odd and unnatural sounds in his travels far and wide; or has been witness to manifestations not usually delegated to the view of mortal eyes. It is believed by many in that country that a miner named Sam Pease was such a man.

Many people in West Texas and New Mexico knew Sam Pease had come to that region to find gold or precious metal. They weren't sure where he'd come from, but they knew he'd spent twenty years and better grubbing near and far for mines and caches which existed in truth, but had been lost in the shelved rock, daggers and mesquite—and for others which had their existence mainly in legend.

Some years he'd be up on the San Saba or the Llano, prowling the brushland for Jim Bowie's lost mine. Others

would find him down in the Big Bend country, scraping amongst the crags and rubble of the Sierra Ladrones for the Lost Nigger, or shifting the bleak miles along the S.P. right of way for the Engineer's Ledge. And then some time he'd be seen up beyond Santa Fe on the upper Pecos where La Mina Perdida had long ago vanished. Still again, he'd follow the old Spanish Trail eastward some from Presidio on the Rio Grande.

Sam Pease grew gaunt of face and frame, and gray of hair, and though sometimes tired of body his spirit never flagged. He scoured the land like an Apache scout; he knew the rock and brush like a native *javelina*. He couldn't get lost. But he never turned up paydirt.

Finally, along in years and white of hair, though still lean and vigorous, Pease leased a piece of alfalfa land on the lower Pecos and settled down to a vigil of Ben Sublett's mine on Guadalupe Peak. There was gold up there, the story went. The richest gold mines in the western world were hidden in the Guadalupes, the Apache Geronimo had one time said. Old Ben Sublett had found his treasure there, but he'd carried the secret to his burial in Odessa in 1892. And it was held since by the remnants of the reservation-bound Apaches in the silence of the mountains.

"It is bad to go there," Sancho Esteban repeatedly pointed out to Sam. "There is only death and misery with going to those places. They have their patrons. It is very bad."

Sancho Esteban was a round-bodied Mexican of uncertain age whose parents, so he related, had died in peonage in Sonora. His wide-spaced, liquid eyes were greatly expressive when he was remonstrating with Sam about the Guadalupes, which he would indicate with a solemn and careful movement of his head, or when, in his uncomplicated manner, he was trying to communicate to Sam the love he had for his mother earth.

"Señor Sam," he would say. "Senor Sam, you have land here. You have land here, and me to help you work it. You have water from the Pecos and irrigation ditches to carry it to the crop. You have more than the most of men; you should be happy."

And Sancho Esteban would glance warily at the buttressed crown of Guadalupe Peak, as though fearful that some watchful spirit would smite him on the spot, and he would shake his head and his unlined face would cloud. "It is not good there, Señor Sam. It is bad. It is very bad."

But it was not entirely true what Sancho Esteban declared about the acreage on the Pecos, for there were certain times when the level of the water in the river would recede greatly and when the moisture in the ditches would become nearly non-existent. In fact they would become bone-dry and thick with frollicking dustdevels, and the alfalfa would approach a state of ruination. The sun would be brassy in the sky and even the pricky pear would wither.

Sancho Esteban would take these things stoically for they were in the history of the land; but they were a cause of fretfulness to Sam, for the alfalfa crop was the only expense account he had to draw on for further digging in the Guadalupes. It was greatly irritating, and he would sometimes wonder if it was all as worthwhile as he'd long believed.

There came a time one season when the drought was especially bad. For a great while there had been no rain in the lower Pecos country and all was dust and sere, brown growth. The river was very low there, like mud and ooze, and even in the far-off north in the Truchas and Sangre de Cristo mountains, its source, it did not brawl and laugh among the rocks, but flowed with lethargy.

As the drought persisted in ferocity it was seen to be no ordinary thing; it became a cause of great remorse for Sancho Esteban, who wept unashamedly at the burning of the fields he cared for, and a cause of rage for Sam, who stamped in anger through the whitened dust and whose eyes did not soften when he gazed at his distant El Dorado on the Peak of Guadalupe.

An there was no alleviation for this in the laughter of the coyote.

"HE IS laughing," Sancho Esteban maintained on the day they first heard the yipping in the low line of hills to the northeast. "He is singing; he is singing after sun-up, and that is a fine

omen. It means we will have rain. And soon."

Same Pease had heard this many times before and he was not enthusiastic. It was an old, old legend, as old as the country which gave it birth. The coyotes were known for varied and wondrous things; they were known to speak in many tongues, in the numerous Indian dialects, the corrupt Spanish of the Mexicans, though never in that of the white man. They were reputed to carry the message of life and death; and they were regarded as weather prophets.

But Sam Pease did not believe these things. In all his years in those lands he had not succumbed to the beliefs which had their roots in an earth-bound culture that was not his. They were the legends of people like Sancho Esteban, who tilled the soil and gave credence to mystical auguries for good and evil and this and that. They were not the legends of a miner; not a miner like Sam Pease.

"Then the coyote is a liar," Sam said to Sancho. Sam swept the hot, dusty horizon and clear, hostile sky above them with an irritable wave of his arm. "You see, not a cloud. As far as you can see there are no clouds. And the air is dry and full of alkali. Sancho, the coyote is a liar. He is simply laughing."

"That is not so," Sancho Esteban replied with warmth. "It is well known that if the coyote sings when the sun is high there is rain. There will be rain, I inform you. It is for certain. It is an omen."

Sam Pease was mostly of an equitable temper and patient mind, a balance achieved perhaps in the many years of painstaking search in the mountains and the plains. He could take most things, or he could leave them. It was a thing of his temperment. He could argue with Sancho, and like it. In truth they had argued many times before, and had felt better for it; but he was irritable now, and sickened by what the roaring sun had done to the alfalfa, and he could not brook Sancho's blind belief in this incredible folklore.

Sancho's eyes were very wide when he spoke these things, and there was in his face the certainty of a religious conviction.

"There's no more truth in that than there is in a drunken cowpoke," Sam Pease said. "That is the talk of old women and ignorant peons. The coyote is good only for stealing lambs and chickens."

"Oh-oh, señor," Sancho said with a small shout. "Oh-oh, you do not know of what you speak."

They had commenced this exchange beneath the shade of the rough, unpainted porch roof, but Sam's gesture at the sky and horizon had brought them out into the sun and dust; and now they faced each other angrily. It had assumed a magnitude all out of proportion to its worth, but each felt the importance to himself.

"The coyote may be what you say," Sancho said, "for like yourself and all

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other creatures, he must eat. But his is a mind of wisdom as well. He has the knowledge of far-off things which we will never know. He knows the coming of life and death; this, my people have known since time began. And he knows of rain and water. It is true, Señor Sam, that he has led travelers to water on the desert. This is true; I know it."

But there was no rain. The coyote in the low hills to the northeast yipped daily after sun-up, and continued until well after the sun had crossed the zenith, but there was no rain. There was only the heat in the concave sky and the dust and the hot wind sighing in a maddening way.

The coyote should not have stayed in Sam's mind the way it did, and he knew it. He should have been able to dismiss the annoyance, but this thing persisted and he could not shake it out. It had become a personal thing to him, and as the sun continued to hammer down, and the hot wind blow steadily, it occurred to him at last that the coyote was not only laughing, but was maintaining a sort of vigil out there and directing the laughter at him.

HE WOULD not admit this strange belief to Sancho, however, and so the emotion he felt was translated into derision.

"Sancho," he would say time and again. "Sancho, where is the rain? It has been five days now—or more or less—since that liar commenced to laugh, and we have no rain."

"There will be rain," Sancho would reply. "The coyote is no liar; always when he sings there will be rain."

And Sancho Esteban would then go off to the fields to dig with a frenzy in the sand-glutted ditches, and to hoe with motherly care about the exhausted roots which were failing in their struggle with the dust and heat. And Sam would return to the shelter of the porch and stare morbidly at the low hills whence came the laughter of the coyote.

At last he could stand the ridicule no longer. At last the jeering became so intolerable that he one day took a small-bore gun and set out across the fields for the hills in the northeast. He did not explain this to Sancho, because he knew that would cause a great storm, and he took a small pack along—empty—to allay suspicion and to convey the impression, which he had already voiced, that was going to the Guadalupes. Since the hills lay in their general direction, it was not unnatural that he should go that way.

But he had never been up there before and was unfamiliar with the terrain leading to them, and so he followed what appeared to be a long-dead stream bed from the edge of his fields up into the rising ground which led to the hills. It was a long and winding hike and he was very warm and tired by the time he came to the hills; but he was also very determined, and he ranged their length and breadth doggedly from noon to dusk.

But he did not find the coyote, nor did he hear it yip. It was as though the creature had disappeared from the face of the earth, or perhaps as though it had been watching him all this time from some secret hiding place.

After he had spent a great deal of time in futile search that latter thought commenced to have an appeal for him; for he did not doubt that this particular coyote, while not possessing the qualities attributed to it by Sancho, was most certainly of a malevolent and scheming nature. And a certain conviction of the truth seemed to accrue to this when he returned to the stream bed at the fall of night and chanced to see the distant hole; a depression or hollow in the face of the hill bordering the gulch, and two hundred feet or so beyond the point where he had emerged from the the southern spurs of the hills.

It was too late and dark at that time to investigate, but the glow of triumph was a certain thing within him, and he was positive he'd found the coyote's lair.

SANCHO ESTEBAN was appalled when Sam advised him of his plan to dynamite the coyote's hollow. His supple, round face became a moon, and his dark eyes approached a state of luminescence.

"Por Dios!" he exclaimed. *"Por Dios!* For that there will never be rain. That is very bad."

"Sancho, you are worse than an old woman," Sam Pease said; he placed his hands on his hips and stared at the simple,

brown face tilted up at his. "You are worse than the oldest crone. You persist in these fables when there is nothing in them. It is nearly ten days now since the coyote laughed and still there is no rain."

"There will be rain," Sancho declared staunchly. "It is for certain. And the coyote does not laugh; he sings. He does not laugh."

"That damned chicken-thief laughed, and has been laughing ever since," Sam Pease said, and he said this with a vehemence because he no longer cared whether Sancho knew of this fixation or not. He no longer cared for anything. He no longer cared for the alfalfa, or for the Guadalupes, or for the phantoms he had tracked those many years. He had been in that country for two decades, and for nearly a quarter of that at the farm; spending three weeks out of every four digging in the mountains. And he had nothing to show for it but the taunting mockery of the coyote in the hills. It had become a symbol of all lost hopes.

"We will dynamite," he said with finality. "In the morning we will dynamite the hole; if he is not in it at the time it will at least serve to drive him elsewhere with his laughter. If he is there, so much the better."

"Señor Sam, that is bad," Sancho Esteban protested. "That is bad. There will be rain. There will; and he is not laughing." Sancho was a picture of total dejection in his appeal, and as the failure of that became apparent he shrugged off toward the ditches and dredged despondently amid the dust.

In the morning, very early, Sam Pease took the sticks of dynamite, which he sometimes used for mining, and a reluctant Sancho along the wandering bed of the ancient stream and into the hills.

They found the cave quite easily in the growing light and Sam was a little surprised that he had not noticed it more quickly when he had come into the hills on the previous day. It was not a very large hole and it was set squarely in the face of broad rock which bordered on the dried-up stream. There was a prickly pear or two about the entrance, and a clutter of loose rock and gravel. There were also some small bones, and a solitary tell-tale feather protruding from a cleft. Sam Pease clucked softly with satisfaction.

"You see?" he said to Sancho. "You see what he has been doing? He will not make rain, but he will make grief for a man who raises chickens."

Sancho examined the bones and feathers from a wary distance, and spoke hopefully. "Perhaps he does not live there after all. These bones are old and bleached; it may be that he has gone away, or that some other animal had had his home in there."

Sam was aware of these things himself, but he said nothing. It was quite possible that nothing lived in there at all, and that whatever it was that had one time been the cave's inhabitant, had not been the laughing coyote. But he was still certain in his own mind that it was, but even if such was not the case he knew his feelings would be assuaged by the making of this gesture.

Sam attached the caps to several sticks of the dynamite and thrust them into the entrance of the cave. It was very dark in there and the light was not as yet sufficient to reveal the contour or the contents of the interior, but by groping, he found a narrow break which would hold them in the floor of the hollow.

SANCHO was standing nervously by all this while and when Sam backed out of the opening they went together up the face of the hill to be in back of the area of blast. Sam unwound the long, white fuse as they climbed, and when they had gone a hundred feet or more Sam stooped down in the rubble and low brush on the ground.

"Perhaps we should go beyond," Sancho Esteban suggested, and he waved his arm vaguely in the direction of the crown of the hills. "Perhaps we are not yet far enough from the cave. I have no desire to become a patron for the bones of whatever is there."

"We will be safe here," Sam said. He struck a wooden match upon a stone and ignited the end of the fuse, which took the fire with a hungry hiss and sparkle. "The charge is not big enough to cave in the entire hill, so the blast will not hurt us here. It will be all right."

The bright spark began to race across the mottled surface of the ground. Sam

lay flat against the earth and Sancho buried his head in his arms, begged the Holy Mother for mercy and protection, and spoke with passion to Sam. "This is not good, Señor Sam. I feel it. It is not good."

Then the earth groaned and was sick beneath them and the roar of the explosion was a tremendous sound in the great, wide quiet of the land. The heated air shook like jelly in a mold and was shot through and through with rock and sand, and the all-obscuring dust which rose in a gray pall in the wake of the receding noise.

When the loose rock ceased its clatter along the ground Sam stood up and braked his way down the slope to where the mouth of the cave had been. The hollow was buried completely beneath a huge pile of raw earth which had burst from the side of the hill and had laid a swath to the border of the dusty guleh. There was all manner of debris and loose rock about the ground, and one of these specimens drew his eyes and he stopped to pick it up.

He turned the thing wonderingly in his hands, trembling now, and an unnatural fever seized him. He saw another on the ground, and still another, and he flung himself wildly at the ragged earth, and scrabbled at the rich rose quartz with the fine webbing of bright gold wires. Unbelievingly, he gathered six of the nuggets in his hands.

"Sancho!" he called. "Sancho!" His voice had an odd, shaking timbre, and truly, he was not aware that he was shouting. "Sancho! Gold! We have gold. We are rich . . . we are rich! Oh-ho, your coyote was a good one after all. His cave was lined with gold!"

Sam Pease capered crazily about the strewn and battered earth, and Sancho Esteban gazed at him in wonderment.

"Oh-ho, Sancho, oh-ho! Your coyote was a good one after all. He could not bring us rain, but he lived among the Seven Cities of Cibola!"

NOW Sam Pease had long dreamed of the great things he would do and see when he found gold. He had not done this too frequently, though, for he knew there was a world of heartbreak for those who spent their strike before they'd made it. It had always been so with those who built their castles in their minds, perhaps as far back as the old Spaniard, Coronado. But he had allowed himself, from time to time, a mental revel on the future that might come to him.

But now there was no check-rein in his imagination. Now, as he whipped the horse and buckboard toward the railroad, five miles distant, and rode the daycoach to the assay office down at Pecos, his mind broke free from the enforced restraint of twenty years. There was gold in the coyote's cave; there was gold for only the mining.

He'd go to Dallas, which he'd never seen. Hell, he'd go beyond that. He'd see St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago and New York. He'd wear fine clothes and escort women of queenly beauty. He'd drink rare wines and eat pressed duck.

He spent three days, and all the money the nuggets brought in Pecos. The gold assayed at over ten thousand dollars a ton and there was enough in the nuggets to buy a new suit and boots for himself, a fine sombrero and sandals for Sancho; and four rounds of drinks for all comers in the best saloon in town. He slept beneath a big, brass chandelier in the hotel, and he had a barber in to shave his ten-day beard. He rode in the parlor car when he went back north.

And back there Sam Pease got a shock. When Sam picked up the horse and buckboard and rode back to the bleak alfalfa ground he'd left he got a shock that stunned him where he sat. Because there was no tired and dust-shot land there anymore, but the healthy beginnings of a crop which hinted of a verdancy the likes of which that land had never seen.

The ditches were not empty now, but filled to overflowing with cool, fresh water which threatened to burst the gates with the unaccustomed burden. It flowed clear and laughing down the long incline of the ancient stream bed, and bubbled with a shining sparkle from the distant rock and fractured ground of the coyote's cave. Sam walked numbly to the porch and stared; and Sancho's face was radiant as he came on a dead run.

"Madre Dios!" he shouted. *"Madre Dios,* Señor Sam! We have water! We

have water from the coyote! Only the day you went away—that night—I am sleeping and I hear the roar from the hills. I am very afraid, señor, but still I look. And from where you stand I see the water all white and dancing, coming from the coyote's cave.

Sam Pease slumped into a sway-backed chair on the porch and gazed at the lively water spilling from the dynamited rupture. He saw it all. There would be a river or a stream beneath those hills which had flowed one time, perhaps, down the ancient stream, but which, in some manner or other, had submerged its course below the earth. The blast had opened an avenue of escape again, and the water had followed the old bed to the irrigation ditches.

Or was it that way?

"The coyote has done this," Sancho Esteban declared. "He gave you gold, and now he gives you water—a stream, not mere rain. You see, it is true about the water. This coyote is remarkable above all others. He knows of all things."

Sam thought deliberately. The water could be damned. The stream could be diverted, the rupture blocked and the water pumped. The mine could be worked.

"It is for you to decide," Sancho Esteban said quietly. "I know what you are thinking, and it is for you to decide. The coyote has led you to gold, even though you wished to kill him, and now he has brought you water. The gold is for you, and you have spent your life in the search of it. But the water is for you, too, and for all living things; it is for the fields here. It is for the land, a true blessing. He promised water and he has brought it. You see, he was not laughing; he was singing."

"No," Sam Pease said slowly, "he was not laughing."

* * *

Now if a stranger in that wide land has occasion to ride the Santa Fe from Clovis down to Pecos one of the train crew will likely point out Guadalupe Peak.

He will explain how the story goes that Sam Pease found gold in there some thirty years ago, in a place not discovered by any other since. He will explain how Sam came roaring into Pecos with six gold nuggets and great ideas for seeing the world that lay beyond the Trinity River. And how, oddly, he didn't do these things at all, but returned to his spread to grow exceedingly rich alfalfa with the help of an unnamed Mexican and a river which burst from the heart of the earth in a moment of need.

And he will tell, perhaps, how the story goes further to relate that the wonders Sam Pease beheld in the shadows of the Guadalupes went way and beyond such splendors boasted by the cities in the east; and how his desire to see those secondary things subsided.

For it is a strange land of strange men and awesome visitations. And Sam Pease had heard the coyote bark.

Who then knows if there was gold in the hills or not. Who knows if the nuggets Sam Pease found were those of a virgin mine, or those of an old cache left for hiding by Ben Sublett when he was shadowed on the trail. Who really knows? Who, perhaps, but the singing coyote? *Quien sabe?*

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THE BORDER-

NOVEL

By

WALT COBURN

He reached down with his left hand and grabbed the man's hair.

CHAPTER ONE

When Boothill Commands

IT HAD been about five years since big Ryan Pryor pulled Chino, the horse wrangler, out of the Rio Grande, below Alamosa in Colorado, and saved the sixteen-year-old Mexican boy's life.

Pryor owned the big Quarter Circle P. They had been swimming a big herd across

BUSTERS

Likely that tough Border cattleman, Ryan Pryor, never heard of the Chinese saying that when you save a man's life, he's your responsibility forever after. It's a safe bet that young Chino, the Mex horse-wrangler whom Pryor fished out of the Rio, never did. Yet, in one crackling moment of bloodshed and gunfire, that ancient precept worked two ways, for one boot-tough, fighting Gringo and the gamest compadre a man could ever ask for!

the Rio Grande, Ryan ramrodding his own round-up. Each cowhand was busy, knowing where he belonged without being told. Pryor was skillfully pointing the swimming lead cattle for the bank when a puncher riding the swing hollered, "Look behind you, Ryan!"

Pryor twisted in his saddle and cut a look back to see young Chino in trouble.

Chino should have been grazing his remuda, but he wanted to be a cowboy, and it looked like this was his first experience handling a saddle horse in swimming water. He had ridden in without loosening his saddle cinch, unaware it was impossible to neck rein a horse in swimming water. If he pulled back on the reins his horse would come over backwards.

Chino was down-stream of the swimming cattle behind Pryor. He pulled his horse over backwards as Ryan turned his head. Ryan caught a glimpse of terror on the boy's face, the black eyes wide with fear. He had come loose from his saddle and his horse went under.

Ryan, in water up to his horse's belly, swung back, jerking at the strap that held his coiled ketch rope. It was a sixty-foot braided rawhide reata. Chino had spent weeks in plaiting that reata and had given it to Ryan as a present. It was thin as a woman's little finger, pliable as silk thread.

Chino went down twice. When he came up again Pryor had a small loop built. He threw the reata almost its entire length. The loop caught one of the boy's arms and he was roped around the neck; that arm in the loop saved him from being choked to death. The big cowman hauled him in hand over hand, lifted him in his arms and slid the noose free.

The swimming cattle out in the channel had balked and the leaders turned back and some big native Colorado four-year-old steers were drowned. It took the better part of all that day to swing the rest of the herd across.

Pryor turned the ramrod job over to one of his top hands. He and the round-up cook worked over young Chino. They got the water squeezed out of his system. By the time they got the kid's pulse started and his breathing working good, sweat was running off Pryor. His wiry black hair was sodden and the sweat trickled into his slate gray eyes and into his week's growth of wiry black whiskers.

The cook fed Chino strong hot black coffee and Pryor stripped off his clothes and put him in his own bed. Chino, naked save for the little medal of Our Lady of Guadalupe fastened around his neck by a dirty buckskin string, lay quietly in Ryan's bed. His swarthy skin, smooth as a girl's, looked pale under the tan. His eyes were still a little glazed from horror and were fixed on the six-foot, hard-muscled, raw-boned, two-hundred-pound Pryor. They followed his every move with worship.

Everything he had to say by way of thanks, Chino saved for the next day. Clad in clean dry clothes, the hat some cowhand had given him clutched in his hands, he waited until Pryor and his crew were in camp. Then Chino made his speech. It was as if he had gone over it word by word and sentence by sentence until he was letter perfect, or as near perfect as his mixture of Spanish-Mexican and cowpuncher American lingo would permit.

HE BOWED stiffly, cleared his throat, and began. "Señor Rynie Pryors! Salud! I have open my eyes and I am alive and I see you, my saviour, the man who save my so-worthless lives. And while I talk by the leeps, the prayer for you ees een my heart like a so-glad and happy song that I am alives. That ees you, Señor Rynie Pryors, who ees the greatest caballero on earth, muy rico so reech that he owns all the beeg mucho grande lands as far as the eyes can see even weeth them cook's field glasses. Planty many cattles and caballo horzes een the remuda. And I theenk to myself without saying so weeth the mouths, I am not worthy, señor, that you, the greatest vaquero, the greatest caballero on earth, should reesk the life of you por me. And een my heart I weep the tearses.

"So! Ojala! I am as notheeng! I have notheeng to geeve! To show and geeve proofs to you how I am feel always until I die that gratitudes!

"I have notheeng to geeve! Only myself! My life ees yours, señor! My life until I die belongs to you, Patron. You say Go and I go queek! You say to me, come and I come! I have made my vow to the Señor Dios to that effects. And I pray to Our Lady of Guadalupe and I tell her all about it and She ees wan hondred percents agree. And I stand here and I tell it scary in front of all thees mens and cowponchers here and even the cooks. My life! Me, Raphael Eduardo Francisco del Castillo, called Chino because my hair is curly, my life belongs to you!"

Chino's voice trembled and broke as he

dropped his old hat and sank to his knees and folded his hands as if in prayer. Tears welled in his dark eyes and coursed unchecked down his smooth cheeks.

"I make thees vow to the Señor Dios and to Our Lady of Guadalupe! My life belongs to you, Señor Rynie Pryors, my patron! Amens."

Pryor stood there, embarrassed. He cut sidelong glances at his cowhands. Not one smiled. A few had Spanish blood in their veins. Their hats were off and they made the Sign of the Cross when Chino crossed himself and rose to his feet, picking up his hat. Even the roughest, men whose everyday talk was tainted with ribaldry and cussing, remained silent and unsmiling.

Pryor was tough, a typical cowhand and cattleman and he lived according to his cowman's lights. But this caught him off-balance, even as it had caught his crew off-guard. They watched Pryor covertly to see what he'd do.

Ryan walked over to the boy. He seemed to forget men were watching him. He put his arm across Chino's slim shoulders and his big, broken-knuckled hand gripped the boy's shoulder. He smiled down at him and the hardness melted from his gray eyes.

"You make me feel shore honored, Chino. From here on, we're compadres. Companeros. Pardners." His white teeth bared in a grin. "The outfit will be in Alamosa in a few days. It's time you got yourself rigged out. New duds. A Stetson hat and a pair of boots that fit. A new saddle to take the place of that old hull you're a-forkin'. We'll dress you up to the nines and set you on a town horse. I'll turn the remuda over to some horse wrangler, and I'll make a cowhand out of you."

"My life is yours, patron."

"None of that patron business. Compadre Rynie will do."

That was only the beginning, that day five years ago.

"You, patron," Chino had said then, "weel always and forevers more weel be een my debts!"

That was the payoff. The punchers turned away wiping the beginning of grins off their faces.

"And the hell of it was," said Baldy, the round-up cook, "Chino meant what he said. . . .

CHINO had come to the Quarter Circle P home ranch one day riding a strawberry roan Mexican mule. He wore ragged levis and an old faded blue cotton shirt. He rode bareback and had a rawhide hackamore on his mule. He tackled Pryor for a horse wrangler job, got it, and made good at it. He knew each horse in the three-hundred-head remuda by name. He knew the habits of each.

Chino was close-mouthed about himself. He had come from below the border in Old Mexico. Chihuahua or Sonora. The roan mule wore a Mexican brand on his left shoulder. And as mules go, the animal was tops.

Pryor had, from time to time, crossed the Mexican border, buying cattle. He was posted on all the bigger brands in Mexico. Particularly Chihuahua and Sonora. He knew the brand on Chino's mule but he kept that knowledge to himself.

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the Spanish Crown—a three point crown. The brand belonged to the vast land grant called the Santa Maria de los Dolores Grant, which at one time belonged to the del Castillo family. Until the long reign of El Presidente Porfirio Diaz was ended in 1910-11 and the great Pancho Villa came to power.

Villa's rebels swept across Chihuahua and Sonora like a giant swarm of man killing locusts. When they had ridden on there were no male members of the del Castillo family left. Loyal to Diaz, they died fighting. So the men bearing the del Castillo name had died and they took their women and children into their merciful death, rather than allow them to fall into the hands of the rebels. The del Castillo name had been wiped out.

The great Santa Maria de Los Dolores Grant belonged to the revolutionists. It changed hands as often and as fast as Old Mexico changed El Presidentes. The Santa Maria de los Dolores Grant was a prize plumb handed to the jefe, the Governor of Sonora. The crown, cattle and horse kingdom in itself, had fallen into blood-spattered hands.

Chino, the fifteen-year-old horse wranglar, had declared himself when he had made that speech. "Raphael Eduardo Francisco del Castillo!"

And Ryan Pryor, thirty years old, who had known the del Castillo family as a boy when his father, Jake Pryor, had taken him to the Santa Maria de los Dolores hacienda, and he had later gone down there to dicker for cattle after the del Castillo family had been wiped out, stared at the boy. But he said nothing then, nor later. Perhaps Chino some day would tell where he had come from and who his parents were.

The first day Chino had shown up he would talk to nobody but Pryor. "I seek to find Don Rynie Pryors, señors. No other."

Chino was like Pryor's shadow from then on. A year later, when Chino became familiar with the cowtown county seat at Durango, he somehow managed to change his name to Raphael Eduardo Francisco del Castillo Ryan Pryor. He had the sealed document to prove it, plastered with a big red seal and ribbons, which he proudly showed Pryor.

PERHAPS the boys at the courthouse thought it was a josh on Pryor, this Mexican boy adopting him for a father. It gave them something to laugh about when they gathered in the saloon after work. It wasn't long before the cow-country knew all about it.

Josh or no josh, Pryor clinched it. When the courthouse gang told him that there was nothing legal to bind him in any way, and that the document all decorated with red seal and ribbons was a big joke. Pryor eyed them coldly.

"Then I'll make it legal, misters. And if ever I hear you now, or later on, letting Chino find out it was meant for a joke, I might lose my temper."

Then he reached out, grabbed two members of the courthouse crowd. He slapped their hats off on the saloon floor and banged their skulls together and threw them back into the half dozen others.

"Sounds for all the world," Pryor told the bartender as he reached across the bar for his drink, "like rappin' a couple of empty dry gourds together." He tossed off his drink and walked out. . . .

When school opened in September Ryan brought the boy to town and enrolled him. The sheriff had a spare room and two boys about Chino's age. He took Chino in like one of the family. Ryan stabled his horse at the feed and livery barn and as soon as school let out on Friday, Chino saddled and rode the twenty-five miles to the ranch. Sunday evening after supper he rode back to town. He kept this up until he got caught in a blizzard and Ryan and his cowpunchers found him half frozen to death in a snow-drift.

"Ees two time you have save my miserable worthless life, now," said Chino. "Ees two time over, now you are in debts to me, no?"

"That's right, Chino."

That put a stop to the week-end visits until Chinook winds melted the drifts in the spring. But on Christmas they were together at the ranch and Chino stayed until school opened.

Chino was always at the head of his class at school. He could write and spell. He learned to unscramble his talk. Only when he got excited did Chino's speech get tangled in a mixture of cowboy lingo

and Mexican. But he picked up fast.

Never once in the five years since Chino had come from Old Mexico had he uncovered any part of his backtrail. But he told Ryan Pryor something of his reason for secrecy.

"Before I make that vow to you, Compadre Rynie, I have make another solemn oath. Never to tell where I am come from. Or who sent me to you. When I am twenty-wan years of age, I must go back. You have seen the Spanish Crown brand on the roan mule. I am the last man of the del Castillo family. Before our enemies could keel me, I was sent to you here in Colorado. But I have talk too much already now. I am swore to a vow of secret silence regarding all them theengs. Ees very dangerous. Por me. And por you, my patron!"

Pryor learned no more. He asked no questions. Chino never volunteered further information. But that did not keep the Colorado cowman from finding out what there was to learn. And what he found out *was* dangerous.

Chino had grown to his full stature. He stood almost six feet, with long, hard, lean muscles. He had a six-shooter, a saddle carbine and by constant practice and a natural gift for handling firearms became a crack shot. He could take his own part in any kind of rough-and-tumble fighting. Whenever there was a free-for-all fight at school, Chino was into it and sometimes he came out on top, other times he got the worst of it.

He learned to ride broncs. When a bronc pitched, Chino rode him or got bucked off and he would pick himself out of the dirt and grin and get back on. He rode clean and never grabbed for the saddle-horn. He had a way with a green bronc when it was his job to break a horse and teach him how to be a cutting or rope horse. He never lost his temper with a bronc, never fought a horse. And when it came to roping, he was a natural.

Ryan Pryor had a right to be proud of his adopted son. Only one thing worried Ryan. Chino was almost too handsome. He got to swaggering a little. When Chino got out his guitar and sang ranchero songs he remembered from Old Mexico in a soft voice it was something to hear. In the ranch bunkhouse or on the roundup of an evening, Chino sang and they all listened, like they were spellbound. He had made up his own song about the boy Chino and Ryan Pryor who had saved his life, always adding new verses. And when he sang to some girl by moonlight, it was something for Ryan to worry about.

Now after five years, Chino was due to graduate from high school at the head of his class. Ryan Pryor rode to town to attend the graduating exercises. But Chino wasn't in town. The sheriff handed Pryor a sealed envelope with his name written on it. It was a short letter, its inked words a little blurred from the tears that had splashed on it.

I have now reached my twenty-first birthday and I have received a letter to come back. It is that vow I made. I dare not tell you where I am going. Or what I am sworn by my vow to accomplish. It is a secret vow, taken by a del Castillo on the souls of my dead ancestors.

I have learned all that I was told to learn. How to shoot straight. How to fight. How to try to overcome what cowardice there is in me and force it down by being brave. As brave as I know how to be. You, my patron, have taught me that. Only the music came natural. The songs and the laughter. For I confess that I am a miserable coward and I hate fighting. I have lain awake nights and my body was bathed in a cold sweat when I woke up with a nightmare dream of what lies ahead in my life. It is the dread of that. And I pray that when the time comes I will be brave and unafraid to die.

Do not try to follow me, Por Dios, do not risk your life. You have risked your life twice to save mine. This letter exacts your solemn promise to not follow me. Never to try to find out where I went. Por Dios, No. This is my duty and it does not concern you. It is for me, Raphael Eduardo Francisco del Castillo. Alone.

There was no more. It told Ryan Pryor what was in the boy's heart: his love for the man—A son's love for a father.

A MONTH passed and Ryan Pryor kept his word. He made no attempt to follow Chino. But he felt guilty and tried to learn everything concerning the Santa Maria de los Dolores Grant and its controllers.

He learned little. The grant was in the hands of Mexican politicos. Some farmable land was divided under the agrarian law and worked by peons, but the peon farmers got only a small share of the crops.

The rangeland, the desert stretches and the mountains were fit only for cattle range, and was under lease to Mexican politicians. The lease took in all cattle, horses and the big hacienda, headquarters of the grant. A man named Olan Thorpe ramrodded the Crown.

What information Pryor got hinted of something crooked on both sides of the Mexican border. The law on the Arizona side hinted that. Below the border was nothing but silence.

Pryor was about ready to go after Chino when a letter came in an envelope smelling of gardenia perfume. The single sheet of notepaper was more strongly scented and the handwriting was feminine. There was no formal salutation.

I am in grave danger. Perhaps, even as you read this, I will be dead. Murdered by enemies. You have saved my life twice. I am asking you to risk your life once more. Go to Nogales. Ask no questions. Mention no names. Just listen. You will soon hear about a place called the Border Cantina, which is located about twenty-five miles north of Nogales in Mexico. Go there. A man will ask you to drink with him. He will drink pulque. You will order tequila with a green lime cut in half and salt. He will tell you his name is Pelon and remove his hat to show you his bald hairless skull. You will tell him your name is Ryan. He will tell you what I cannot write.

Perhaps Pelon will be dead before you reach there. Murdered by our enemies. In that case, you sit at a corner table in the patio of the Border Cantina, with your back to the wall. Order tequila, a plate of green limes cut in half and a salt shaker. This señorita will come over to your table. She will have her guitar and will sing for you. The señorita is called Panchita. When it is safe and you are alone with Panchita she will talk.

Say nothing, señor. It is very dangerous. Think well before you start on this mission. I warn you, now before you undertake this dangerous journey, that only by the grace of Almighty God and the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe, can you hope to survive death. I sign this Chino.

* * *

A week later Ryan Pryor rode up to the Border Cantina on the Mexican line. He had caught the first train for Arizona. He had his saddle and saddle carbine in a sack, together with cartridge belt and holster. He wore his gun in a shoulder holster under his coat, while he was on the train. When he reached Tucson he bought the best horse he could find and pulled out as soon as he located the direction of the Border Cantina. He avoided Nogales entirely.

He had his carbine in his saddle scabbard, his six-shooter buckled on. He'd purposely let a week's ugly stubble cover his jaws almost to his cheekbones. He looked like a man on the dodge.

Ryan timed his arrival at the cantina with moonrise. There was a long thatched roofed ramada with a long feed rack filled with hay. A dozen or fifteen horses were tied there, most saddled with the front cinch loosened. Ryan watered his leg-weary horse, pulled off his saddle and tied the horse by the hackamore rope to the feed rack. He hid his saddle carbine in the hay, hitched up his cartridge belt and headed for the cantina.

It was made of adobe set in a hollow square around a large patio. A long pine board bar occupied one large room, half a dozen card tables next to the walls. A big doorway led from the barroom into the tile-floored patio where tables were scattered about an open space left for dancing. A lighted candle in a large paper bag sat on each table.

A Mexican guitar and fiddle brought

music just loud enough to be heard above the jumbled voices of drunken men.

The bar was lined with drinkers, the gambling tables filled with Americans and Mexicans. They all looked like cowhands and none had removed their spurs.

Ryan halted outside the open doorway, his eyes searching for Chino. Chino was not among them. He then tried to locate some Mexican that might fit the description of Pelon, the Bald One. He soon gave that up. They all wore Stetsons or Mexican sombreros.

One man was a raw-boned specimen. He wore his pants legs in tops of fancy-stitched boots. His flannel shirt, the collar open, was a glaring red. He had a drooping yellow mustache. A heavy thatch of yellow hair showed from under the wide-brimmed Stetson. When the lamplight caught his eyes they showed yellow as a mountain lion's. A long knife scar marred one side of his face from earlobe to a corner of his mouth. From under sun-bleached brows his eyes shifted restlessly. Finally they looked out through the open doorway where Ryan stood in the shadow. Their shifting gaze remained fixed, and Ryan wondered if he could see into the dark.

THE giant lowered his head to speak to the man next to him, a short bow-legged, barrel-chested jasper whose thin long arms reached almost to his knees. The Mexican wore an old leather charro jacket embroidered with tarnished silver thread, and pants that flared at the bottom. A hugh silver embroidered felt sombrero was titled back on his head.

Ryan almost turned sick at the sight of the Mexican's pockmarked face. A frog-like mouth seemed stretched from ear to ear in an evil grin. There was no bridge to his nose and two hairy nostrils showed above the long hairless upper lip. Old knife scars ridged his face with criss-cross dirty white lines. He had a huge head seemingly too big for a human body, and it sat between his shoulders, all but neckless. He wore crossed cartridge belts across his thick chest, each loop filled with brass cartridges. He carried a short heavy-bladed machete in a leather scabbard on his flank.

"Take a look around outside, Cabezon." The blond giant's voice was harsh.

"Si! Pronto, Señor Thorpe!"

Ryan walked into the saloon. A hush fell across the place and all eyes seemed fixed on Ryan Pryor as he entered.

"Never mind, Cabezon. He's come in." Olan Thorpe's eyes narrowed.

Pryor walked to where Thorpe leaned with his back against the bar, his elbows resting on it. He had one bootheel hooked in the brass foot rail.

Ryan halted. He had to tilt his head sideways and upward to look into the yellow eyes. "I was wonderin' out there if them eyes of yourn could see through the dark."

"Now that you found out," Thorpe growled, "what happens?"

"I'm checkin' that bet right back to you, big mister!"

Thorpe had two filled cartridge belts buckled around his middle. A pair of silver-handled guns in Mexican-carved holsters were tied low on his big thighs. His knife-scarred mouth twitched.

"A lot of men," he said softly, "tip their

WOT'CHA LOOKIN' FOR THIS TIME, CUNN'L-TIGERS?
TIGERS PIFFLE, SAM, THERE'S MA' GAME!
Smart Men Buy
PM BLENDED WHISKEY
THEY LIKE THE CLEAR, CLEAN TASTE
NATIONAL DISTILLERS PRODUCTS CORPORATION, NEW YORK, N.Y. PM DE LUXE BLENDED WHISKEY. 86 PROOF. 70% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS

hats to me. Mebbyso you don't know who I am. I'm Olan Thorpe. I'm ramroddin' the Spanish Crown outfit below the border. Once in awhile when I don't like the way some hombre parts his hair or the color of his eyes don't suit me, I have that hombre 'dobe-walled."

"So I heard." Pryor grinned.

Ryan felt cold and empty in the belly. He heard the shuffling of boots and tinkle of rowels as men closed in around him.

Tobacco smoke hung in layers in the yellow lamplight. Pryor felt the impact of men's eyes about him. Ugly, evil, merciless eyes. They were on both sides and behind his back. There would be knives. A knife is a Mexican's weapon.

The squat Cabezon moved away from Olan Thorpe, his right hand closing on the machete. Cabezon, the Big Head, slipped through a crowd that made way for him, shrinking back as from some beast. Ryan knew Cabezon had come up behind his back from the chimed sounds of his Chihuahua spurs. As the noise hit Ryan he felt the hairs along the back of his neck rise. But he stood tracked and his gray eyes watched Thorpe.

Ryan's legs were spread. He was ready to whirl at the big giant, his hand on the butt of his six-shooter. If this was it, he'd die fighting.

CHAPTER TWO

Payoff—in Bloody Ears

OLAN THORPE'S elbows were still braced against the bar, his bootheel hung on the brass rail. For all his seeming carelessness, the giant was tense as a coiled rattler.

Ryan did not see the man who had come from the patio and now stood in the doorway—until he spoke! *"Que pasa?"* The voice had the sound of torn silk. "What goes on here?"

It was the voice of some military man barking orders and—his orders were meant to be obeyed.

The crowd backed away, more quickly and noisier than when they had closed in on Ryan. Sombreros reluctantly slid off sweat-matted heads.

Thorpe didn't move. The corner of his knife-scarred mouth was twitching.

Behind him, Ryan heard the bell-like tinkle of Cabezon's big spur rowels.

"Por Dios!" Cabezon's breath stank of sour mescal. "The jefe!" Cabezon backed away.

Only when Thorpe's bloodshot yellow eyes slid away and looked towards the doorway did Ryan look in that direction.

The man there was short and paunchy, dressed in a badly-wrinkled white linen suit. The collar of his white silk shirt was wilted, limp around his bull-like neck. A four-in-hand crimson tie was run through a big gold ring with a huge ruby setting. Under each armpit the lined coat bulged from the two guns he carried in shoulder holsters. He was moon-faced and his oily skin glistened with sweat. A black mustache, the waxed ends twisted to a point, gave him a military look. His black hair was plastered with hair dressing, perfumed. He must have doused himself with perfume to kill the odor of sweat because the sweetish odor of the man over-rode the whiskey stench of the place. His eyes were set close across the flat bridge of his nose. They were pale gray, almost colorless against his swarthy skin. Crafty, treacherous eyes.

Then Cabezon was standing close beside the paunchy man. His froglike mouth moved but his whisper carried no farther than the ears of the man it was meant for.

The jefe, the chief, spoke English without a trace of accent. "When a man commits a crime that deserves punishment that man will be stood with his back to an adobe wall, to face a firing squad. I will give such an order. And you, Thorpe, will carry out that order. *Verstehen Sie?*" He clenched a fat stubby fist and pounded his big chest above the protruding paunch.

"I, Guillermo Wilhelm Guzzmann, jefe of the Santa Maria de los Dolores Ranch, give all the orders. You, Señor Olan Thorpe, you, hombre, are paid only to carry out my commands!"

The jefe's swarthy face grew purple. Beaded sweat broke out on his skin. He wiped the sweat off with a large crimson silk handkerchief.

Thorpe's yellow eyes looked murderous. He moved his left arm and his big hand closed on the neck of a tequila bottle. He lifted it to his mouth and his big white teeth gripped the neck of the bottle and

he kept swallowing in big gulps. When he had drained the bottle he tossed it over his shoulder and it crashed against the adobe wall above the back bar, shattering the row of bottles.

"You give your orders, Chief." Thorpe straightened up, hitching at his cartridge belts. "I carry 'em out." His voice came from the scarred, twitching corner of his mouth.

"I figgered you was at the home ranch." Thorpe hesitated a moment, then added, "Or at the cave in Nogales with a purty little señorita on each knee. Where the Governor of Sonora is throwin' a big banquet."

"So?" The jefe grunted. His cheeks puffed out. His joweled face grinned at the compliment and he fingered his gold ring.

"So this hombre is a stranger," Thorpe went on, "and the Border Cantina don't like strangers, I was tryin' to read his brand."

FROM out in the patio sounded a guitar and the clear toned voice of a girl singing. Her song came closer and she stood behind the jefe in a Mexican fiesta chino poblana costume, her blue-black hair shining, red lips parted from white teeth. Long-lashed, velvet-black eyes under heavy black eyebrows looked over the jefe's shoulder straight into Pryor's eyes.

Her song broke off abruptly. Her red lips pouted. Her dark eyes were sending Ryan a warning.

"Ees that you do not like my songs, then, Señor Jefe? Per'aps Panchita has the voice of a crow, no?"

The paunchy jefe turned, his oily jowls widening as he licked his thick lips.

"Liebchen!"

He reached out but the señorita sidestepped beyond his reach. She laughed but Ryan detected a brittle edge to it. Her eyes were shadowed with fear.

Thorpe's big fists clenched and he took a step forward. But Cabezon stepped in between as the paunchy jefe turned to follow the girl into the patio. There was an evil grin on Cabezon's mouth.

"El Hombre Sanguinario," Cabezon stood close to Thorpe, his voice low pitched, "gives orders to be left alone."

"El Hombre Sanguinario. The Butcher." Thorpe rubbed a hand across his mouth. "The damned taller-paunched German-Mexican half-breed butcher! He wants to be left alone, eh? By the hell, Cabezon, he'll be left alone some day. Out in the broad middle of the desert. The buzzards will stuff themselves sick on his rotting fat carcass if he ever lays a hand on Panchita."

"Panchita," Cabezon's voice was a croaking whisper, "she can take care of herself."

Thorpe's eyes were ugly as he looked down at Cabezon.

"I wonder," he growled, "when the showdown comes, whose side you'll be on, Cabezon?"

"On the winning side." Cabezon's evil chuckle sent a shiver along Pryor's spine.

He sidled past and stood on the brass rail and asked for mescal.

Thorpe's yellow eyes looked at Ryan. The corner of his mouth twitched. He was sizing up Pryor as though seeing him for the first time.

"What name you travelin' under?"

"Ryan."

"Have a drink, Ryan. At least you're a white man. Not a damned mongrel. Right now I could use a tough hombre with plenty guts and just enough brains to savvy the burro. And you won't be paid off in chickenfeed."

"There was some loose talk about a 'dobe wall," said Pryor.

Olan Thorpe grinned and shook his head. "That was to git you acquainted. Part of the initiation into the Lawless Brotherhood of Renegades. The fraternal order of the damned. Like the Elks or the Eagles. Only the emblem should be the death's head. The skull and crossbones. If we had a flag it would be black with a bone white skull and crossbones on it. Landlocked pirates. Soldiers of misfortune.. Today we're alive. Git drunk, make love, fight. Tomorrow? *Quien sabe?* We might be dead. The hell with it!" Thorpe jestured towards the patio with a fresh bottle of tequila.

"That half-breed cabron has got his own standin' army of paid Yaqui tin soldiers at the ranch. And Cabezon is their chief. When he sets his horse like a sack of wet bran and barks his orders, damned if them Yaquis don't prance and goose

step. Ask Cabezon if you don't want to take my word for it.

"Hoch the Kaiser Guillermo Wilhelm Guzzman, Chief of the Santa Maria de los Dolores!" Olan Thorpe gargled the raw tequila and spat it out on the floor.

"To take his taste out of my mouth."

Ryan ordered tequila with sliced green limes and a salt shaker. He shook salt on the back of his hand, licked it, downed his shot of tequila and sucked the halved green limes.

"We're holdin' a big beef herd just below the border," said Olan Thorpe, "in the Spanish Crown iron. It's up to Guzzmann whether we use the big gate in the border fence and stand inspection and pay duty or if we slip 'em across the line when the moon gits right. It don't matter a damn to me, either way. I get paid more when I dodge the border patrol. You want a job?"

"I might be talked into it."

"It ain't punchin' cows. I'm full-handed."

"Keep talkin', big mister."

"If I was to ride up on Guzzmann's dead carcass," Thorpe lowered his voice to a whisper, "at sunrise, with his ears marked in the Spanish Crown mark, you could name your own bounty. The pay-off is in good U.S. foldin' money. And no Mexican standoff on the deal."

Ryan toyed with his empty glass. Olan Thorpe poured tequila in it till it slopped over the brim.

"What's the Spanish Crown earmark?" Ryan asked quietly.

"In this case it's crop both ears. Slice 'em off next to the skull. Keep the ears. When you turn both ears over to me, I pay off."

Ryan's black-whiskered mouth spread in a flat grin. He lifted his filled glass with a steady hand that did not spill a drop.

Thorpe touched the glass with his tequila bottle and drank. This time Ryan forgot the salt and the green lime. He drank his tequila straight.

Thorpe lifted his voice to a bellow. "Drink up, hombrecitos! Grab yourselves a bottle to take along! We're headin' back to camp!"

Thorpe herded them all outside. He had a corked quart of tequila in each hip pocket. They mounted and rode off at a long lope into the night.

RYAN and Cabezon were left alone at the bar. Cabezon rolled a mixture of marijuana and tobacco in a thick black cigarette paper and held it between a thumb and two fingers without licking the paper. He lit his cigarette and pulled the smoke deep into his lungs. Smoke came through his hairy nostrils when he spoke.

"You have the ear por musica, Señor Ryan?" His head jerked towards the patio. "Por the songs of the Señorita Panchita, no?"

"After you, Cabezon." He had no intention of turning his back on this monstrosity.

Cabezon led the way into the patio. The musicians had laid aside their guitar and fiddle and were eating. Panchita sat at a table across from Guzzmann, who kept trying to grab the girl's hand.

Ryan headed for a table in the far corner, where he could sit with his back against the wall. Cabezon picked up the guitar, strumming it softly as he walked.

Then in a soft voice Cabezon was singing, and gradually the volume of his voice grew louder. He stood in the flickering candlelight and sang. It was a song that had never been written, and in it was the deep sorrow, suffering and misery of the Yaquis. All their warlike pride. For they had never been conquered by Spanish or Mexican. They had fled across the border or sought safety in the mountains. They hated Mexicans and gringos with a cruel everlasting hatred.

Ryan forgot Cabezon's ugliness and stench. There was only the song and the guitar. It held Panchita spellbound. The musicians let their food grow cold, their wine untasted.

Only Guzzmann remained unmoved. His fingers slid cautiously across the table to reach Panchita's hand.

Ryan watched the girl's face as he listened. He saw it slowly lose all its forced gaity and seemed to grow more mature. Lines of sorrow replaced her smile. Tears welled in the dark eyes that stared off into the shadows, perhaps seeing beyond the shadows, conjuring up old memories.

Guzzmann's clammy fingers closed over

Panchita's hand as Cabezon's song ended. She let out a small cry of horror and tried to jerk her hand away. She was on her feet, and Guzzmann hurled aside the table with its wine bottle and glasses and went after her. The candle guttered and almost set fire to the big paper sack.

Guzzmann was panting. He was strong in spite of his blubber. The girl was no match for his strength. She kicked and struggled, black eyes blazing as she fought. She looked once at Ryan as he kicked back his chair and came swiftly towards them, then she quickly looked away and fought all the harder.

Ryan grabbed the back of Guzzmann's coat collar. It ripped apart under his savage jerk. With a snarl, the jefe let go the girl and his right hand clawed for a shoulder gun. He never got it out of the holster.

Ryan smashed both fists into the bloated face. Blood spurted from a smashed nose. Thick lips were mashed into pulp against yellow teeth. His eyes were smashed shut, blinded by battering fists. Guzzmann went over backwards and Ryan kicked him hard in the paunch and well below the belt, kicked him again in the groin, and the man moaned. He kicked him in the face. Spurs tinkled and Ryan suddenly remembered Cabezon and jerked his gun as he turned.

Cabezon's rowels chimed as he walked across the worn tiles to where Ryan stood over the motionless Guzzmann, his six-shooter in his hand.

CABEZON'S long arms hung, palms backward, almost to his knees. His left hand was empty of any weapon. He had the machete in his right. In Cabezon's grip it could slice off a man's head. His eyes were wicked as sin.

Ryan stepped slowly backward, his gun covering Cabezon. He almost collided with Panchita. Her hand touched his arm and her fingers closed around it. He could hear her rapid breathing and the sweet odor of her gardenia perfume filled his nostrils. It was the same perfume that had been on the letter signed Chino.

Cabezon paid no attention to Ryan's gun. He stood straddle of Guzzmann, his sombrero tilted back. He reached down with his left hand and gripped the man's hair. The machete slithered and naked steel caught the candlelight. Panchita cried out and her fingers dug into Ryan's arm.

Cabezon sliced one of Guzzmann's ears off close to his skull. He twisted the man's head. Then he sliced off the other ear. The machete slid into its leather scabbard and Cabezon's hand slid from the wrist thong. He slid the big gold ring with its huge ruby setting from the red tie.

"Por you, Señor Ryan." Cabezon held the two ears, dripping blood, in the palm of his hand.

"Por you, Señorita Panchita." The other hand held the ruby ring.

They stood side by side, now, Ryan and the girl.

Something in Cabezon's eyes was forcing Ryan to take the bloody ears.

Panchita took the ring.

Cabezon backed away, spurs chiming with each step, until he stood in the doorway that led to the bar.

"Adios, Señor Ryan," he boomed. "Adios, Señorita Marie de los Dolores

del Castillo!" Then Cabezon was gone.

Ryan shoved the ears into his shirt pocket. Then he turned to the girl. She had the ring in her clenched fist.

He saw her now, as for the first time. The struggle with Guzzmann had left the sleekness of her hair tumbled. Her eyes were looking up into his with that same deep blackness that had been in Chino's when he had vowed his life to Pryor.

"Look out! Behind! *Por Dios!*"

Ryan gripped the girl's arm and flung her aside. He ducked and jumped the other way as a gun exploded and the pinging whine of a .38 copper-jacketed bullet passed his head.

Guzzmann had rolled onto his side, his eyes thick slivers of pale light, the gun smoking in his hand.

Ryan kicked the gun from Guzzmann's hand and thumbed his own six-shooter hammer back.

"Don't!" Panchita's voice was brittle. "*Por Dios!* Don't kill him!"

"Stand back." Ryan snapped. "Stand back or you might git shot."

"Pull your other gun, Jefe!"

Panchita snatched Guzzmann's second gun from its holster. "Where is Raphael Eduardo Francisco del Castillo?" Her voice was sharp. "Have you murdered him? Or have you got him hidden where you can torture him?"

Guzzmann was sitting up. He put both hands to the side of his head where the pain throbbed. His fat short fingers came away bloody. He stared down at his bloody hands. Then they went back to the sides of his head and he let out a moan.

"*Gott in Himmel!*"

He staggered to his feet and weaved like a drunken man.

Ryan cut a swift look at the girl. "Let me handle this deal." He grabbed Guzzmann by the front of his shirt. "How do you want to die? We hang murderer's on my side of the line. 'Dobe wall 'em south of the border. You got your choice."

"*Ich weiss nicht!*" moaned Guzzmann. "*Lieber Gott!* Mein ears!"

"Talk American!"

"I don't know where young del Castillo is! He's Cabezon's prisoner!"

Ryan somehow felt the jefe was telling the truth.

"Cabezon trapped him. He's holding him for high ransom. He's trying to hold me up. The price he asks is too high. Out of reach. Del Castillo is Cabezon's ace in the hole. He might make a deal with that renegade gringo Olan Thorpe . . . *Mein Gott in Himmel!* Mein ears!"

Ryan shoved his hand in his shirt pocket. "Here's your damned ears!" Ryan grinned flatly as he held out the ears.

GUZZMANN recoiled. Ryan grinned twistedly and shoved the ears back into his shirt pocket. He turned to the girl. "What will we do with this thing?"

"Hold him prisoner. He could be lying," said the girl.

"No. He's not lyin'. Where'll we put him on ice?"

Panchita clapped her hands. The bartender and two Mexican musicians came out from shelter.

"Lock Guzzmann up. Wash him off first and bandage his wounds. You know where to put him where nobody can find him. Pronto."

"Schnapps!" croaked Guzzmann as they took hold of him. "*Gott in Himmel!* Schnapps!"

"Give the fat hog his whiskey," said the girl. "Get him out of my sight before I kill him with his own gun."

She motioned Ryan to follow her and opened a small door. He followed her through the door and she closed it behind them. They were standing out in the open, in the shadows of the adobe wall.

Her hand found his in the darkness. She stood close to him and her hand was cold in his grip. "You are Ryan. My brother told me about you. You have been a father to him. The only father he ever remembered. He came to the convent in Tucson where I lived for years. He was on his way to Mexico.

"When he left me, I followed. I came here to the Border Cantina where I hoped to find Pelon and my brother. I called myself Panchita for a disguise. Guzzmann was fooled. Olan Thorpe was fooled. Until tonight, I thought that I had Cabezon fooled.

"But there was no sign of my brother. He had disappeared. Nor was there any trace of Pelon.

"My grandfather sent Pelon, the majordomo of the grant, far away across the

border. He ordered Pelon to take with him the youngest of all the del Castillos. He was no more than a baby. Pelon took me, a small girl, to care for my baby brother. I was always old Pelon's favorite. He took us to the old pueblo of Tucson and left us with the padres at the Mission of San Xavier del Bac. The padres took me to the convent of St. Joseph.

"When it was dangerous, Pelon sent my brother to you. Pelon knew your father was to be trusted and that you, his son, could be trusted."

Ryan held both the girl's hands. He spoke quietly. "I remember you now. You were a chubby bashful little girl. All eyes and your hair was a mop of black curls. You always hid when I showed up with my father. You'd look out from behind something, all big eyes and curly hair. All that was a long time ago."

"Yes. You were the boy Ryan. Pelon gave you a pair of spurs with big rowels and you dragged the spur rowels along the ground when you walked. It was a long time ago, Ryan."

"Chino." Ryan remembered what had brought him here.

"I wrote that note and signed his name. Chino was too proud to send for you. He told me he wanted to get back what was our birthright before he sent for you. But I was afraid. Afraid for him."

"I'm glad you sent that letter. Glad I'm here. We'll find Chino. I know he'll be alive.

"You are forever in my debt! Chino would say. He kinda got it twisted. Or mebbyso he didn't. Chino belongs to me. He adopted me for a father. He's too young and full of life to ever die, Dolores. Chino believed too much in his Señor Dios and in the prayers of Our Lady of Guadalupe to be dead. And you, Dolores, your prayers will surely be answered. I don't know anything about religion. But you both have faith in God and you've given me what faith I have in Him. Chino is very much alive."

THE girl released both her hands. They went up to Ryan's black whiskered face and she had to stand on tip-toes in her high-heeled red slippers, to kiss him. Then his arms went around her and he held her close until her trembling ceased and then he kissed her mouth and her lips clung warmly to his black-whiskered mouth.

He was holding her like that when out of the night came a jumble of sound. Gunfire and men shouting, and a sound that was like the rumble of distant thunder. Cattle bawling and that ominous clashing rattle of long-horned Mexican steers stampeding.

Any cowpuncher who was ever on night guard when a stampede broke never forgot that terrifying sound. It was close enough to where they stood so that they could feel the near-earthquake under their feet.

Ryan's arm was across the girl's shoulders and he pointed out across the wide mesa where a swift-moving huge black blot was skylighted. The flash of gunfire stabbed the darkness and above the din came the bellowing of Olan Thorpe.

"Turn 'em loose! Let 'em go to hell! Ride clear, hombrecitos! We got a fight on our hands!"

Then a keening high pitched voice lifted. *"Viva del Castillo! Viva! Viva! Viva del Castillo!* Keel them! Keel them ladrones cattle thiefs! Save the gringo cabron Olans Thorpe por me! Raphael Eduardo Francisco del Castillo! Save heem por me!"

"Chino!"

Ryan held the girl close, almost ruthlessly in his arms. He kissed her hard. "Hide! Hide quick!"

Ryan let her go. He headed for the ramada at a run.

"Take that palomino. I left him there for you!"

Ryan threw his saddle on a big palomino but this golden horse was one of the breed of the great palomino strain the king of Spain had sent to Porfirio Diaz. Bred for color, speed and endurance. The palomino stud had not been at the ramada when Ryan rode up. The stud had been kept in a stable all by himself. But somebody had tied the palomino stud there.

He shoved his saddle carbine in the saddle scabbard and mounted. He had never ridden a stud. Studs were meant for breeding purposes. But the palomino stud was well broken. He felt the power between his legs as the animal reared and lunged when Ryan gave him his head

CHAPTER THREE

Brand of the Destroyer

"TURN them cattle loose!" Thorpe bellowed. "We kin gather 'em later! Head for the cantina! Watch out for that Cabezon's Yaquis. They'll shoot you in the back. Cabezon's trickly as hell!"

Cabezon's voice lifted, shouting orders to his Yaquis, who were hired, paid and uniformed by Guzzmann. They were dangerous, cruel and without mercy.

Cabezon shouted orders in Yaqui, the only language they understood. Cabezon was shouting at them to hold the stampeding cattle. To drift with the running steers till the stampede slacked up and they could turn the leaders and get the herd milling. Cabezon's voice was the only law the Yaquis knew or obeyed.

"Run the cattle into the Yaqui Hills. Meat for our women! Meat for our old men! They need meat! If Thorpe's renegades try to stop you, kill them! If Pelon's Mexicans try to stop you, kill the Mexicans. You are Yaquis. You have never laid down your guns for an enemy. Fight, Yaquis!

"Pelon! Pelon!" Cabezon shouted in Spanish. "You have boasted! You have sworn to kill Cabezon! Make good your boasting! I am here! Ride out, then, to meet me! Alone! No guns! A machete is a man's steel blade! Ride out, Pelon! I will slice your head off and stick it on the point of my steel blade. Make good your bragging, thou Pelon, the Bald One!"

"Cabezon! Cabezon! Thou Big Head!" A harsh, rasping voice lifted above the shouts and slackening gunfire. "Hired killer! Paid murderer! Thou Yaqui without honor! Paid off for murder by Jefe Guzzmann's filthy, blood-stained, stolen pesos. The blade of my machete is whetted sharp! I'll offer your head to your Jefe Guzzmann! That he may gaze upon the big head of Cabezon before my Mexican firing squad shoots him down! Ride out to meet Pelon!"

Olan Thorpe and his renegades were spurring hard for the Border Cantina.

Chino and his Mexicans were riding hard to head them off. It was a running fight.

Ryan Pryor on his palomino was almost caught between two fires. The bullets whined and snarled past Ryan's head like angry hornets. He had to ride fast and hard to keep from being shot in the crossfire. He reined his blowing sweating palomino to a halt, the stampede thundering off into the distance. Then Ryan stared, spellbound.

He saw the squat Cabezon, his machete glinting in the moonlight, his horse spurred to a run.

Headed straight for him was a gaunt, white-haired, white-mustached, leather-faced man, dressed in a shabby old leather charro jacket and pants, a sombrero slanted across his white head. A big machete swinging. His horse spurred to a run. It was Pelon.

Neither man slacked as they rode straight at each other. They swerved a little just before they met, so close their tapadero-covered stirrups scraped. Their heavy machetes clashed loudly as steel parried steel. It was like a cavalrymen's saber duel. Sparks sprayed as the heavy steel blades clashed and deflected. Then they passed and each reined his horse to a motion that slid each horse rump squatted to a halt. They whirled and charged each other again. And again their machetes clashed with a metallic ringing force that sent sparks flying.

Cabezon's Yaqui war cry mingled with Pelon's *"Viva del Castillo!"*

They whirled their horses and charged each other again, and yet again their heavy steel machetes clashed and parried and sprayed the night with a shower of sparks. Both horses were dripping sweat, and blowing.

They pulled up to blow their winded mounts. Cabezon's bell-toned laugh sounded. He had sighted Ryan Pryor sitting the big palomino stud fifty yards away, the sole spectator to this duel.

"Ah! Señor Ryan!" Cabezon's machete pointed at him.

Then Pelon looked in that direction.

"Pelon! Thou fool! Have you, then, asked young del Castillo how he was free to ride tonight?" Cabezon shouted.

"No. You held him prisoner. You were paid by that cabron Guzzmann!"

"I was paid to kill young del Castillo. But I have yet to get my killer's pay. I

held young del Castillo prisoner and kept him safe deep in the Yaqui Hills. Tonight I showed that young caballero mercy. I set my prisoner free. I gave him back his guns. I mounted him on his own horse. And I told him where to find you, Pelon. Cabezon does not lie to any man. I tell the truth."

PELON sat his shorse, ramrod straight in his silver-mounted old Mexican saddle. Grim-faced, his opaque black eyes hard.

"Only a short while ago, Pelon, that man yonder, Señor Ryan, fought Jefe Guzzmann because he annoyed Panchita, who is none other than the Señorita Maria de los Dolores del Castillo. When Ryan beat the cabron senseless, I, Cabezon, sliced off both Guzzmann's ears and gave them to the Señor Ryan, so that he could give them to Olan Thorpe and claim the reward Thorpe put for a bounty on Guzzmann's hide.

"Likewise I took the gold ring with the most perfect large ruby setting that once belonged to old Don Francisco del Castillo, from his necktie and presented it to Maria de los Dolores, his granddaughter. It was the ruby ring that El Sanguinario, the Butcher Guzzmann, himself cut from old Don Francisco's dead hand, finger and all.

"Then I rode away to free young del Castillo and send him to where you, Pelon, waited with your Mexicans. Is that, then, the way of your enemy? Once, you and I were friends. Compadres. Companeros. That was long ago. Before the revolution.

"Then Don Francisco ordered you to leave, and you took the youngest male del Castillo and the girl Dolores across the line.

"My Yaquis were starving in the hills where the Mexicans drove them into exile. The rebels paid cash for the Yaquis to fight with the rebels against the Federalistas. Those were pesos that bought food for my starving Yaquis. But we did not kill a one of the del Castillos. Who told you that, Pelon, told lies." Cabezon saluted with his machete.

"If you still think Cabezon lies, we will resume the duello. To the death."

Pelon saluted Cabezon with his machete, and they rode slowly towards each other, sliding their machetes into leather scabbards. When they met their hands gripped.

"Take the cattle to your starving Yaquis, Cabezon," Pelon said. *"Viva con Dios.* God protect you. Adios."

"I ride to the Border Cantina with you, Pelon. And with the Señor Ryan. That Olan Thorpe is evil as the most evil. His hand-picked tough renegades are all evil men. Murderers who kill and burn down the homes of the rich and poor alike. They destroy whatever they find and have a lust to destroy. They kill the old women and they rape young women and children. They are a drunken, loco weed-smoking pack of wolves. Like a wolf pack with its yellow-eyed pack leaders, they are wanton killers. Men dishonored and without honor. Inbred, poisoned scum of the border. Olan Thorpe, renegade, must be destroyed and his men destroyed with him, to the last man, and their bodies burned so that their rotting carcasses cannot taint the soil of our land. *Anda!* Let's go!"

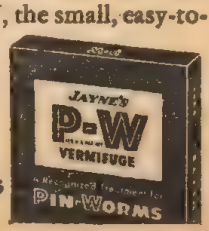
Shocking Facts about PIN-WORMS

You may think that Pin-Worm infection is rare and strikes only "careless" families —that, therefore, your children are safe.

Don't you believe it! Medical experts report that at least *one out of every three persons* examined, adults and children alike, was a victim of Pin-Worms. And this embarrassing, annoying condition can spread through entire families.

There's no need to take chances with this ugly pest. A medically approved, scientific treatment now destroys Pin-Worms easily and effectively. This remedy is **Jayne's P-W Vermifuge** developed by the famous Jayne Co., specialists in worm remedies for over 100 years.

So watch for the warning signs, especially the tormenting rectal itch. Then ask your druggist for **P-W**, the small, easy-to-take tablets that act in a special way to bring real relief from Pin-Worms.



Just Remember: P-W ® for Pin-Worms

Together they rode, Cabezon and Pelon, straight up to where Ryan Pryor sat his horse. Pelon swept off his huge felt sombrero that bared his head—and he was bald as a rock. Ryan gripped the claw-like hand and saw the grin spread across the leathery white-mustached face. Eagle-beaked, gaunt, handsome with all its fierce pride.

Cabezon rolled and lit a marijuana cigarette. It glowed in a corner of his froglike mouth. His eyes were red coals.

"Anda! Anda!" Cabezon cried impatiently.

"It was my plan," said Pelon, "to chase Olan Thorpe into making a last stand at the Border Cantina. I gave young Don Chino, as he now calls himself, orders to surround the Border Cantina. To wait until I showed up. We have Thorpe trapped."

"What of Dolores?" asked Ryan.

"Fear not, Señor Ryan. She is safely hidden. She is away by now."

"But she gave me her horse," said Ryan.

"She has the palomino mare. The stud belongs to Don Chino. She rides the mare. The three-year-old mare is more gentle. Faster. The fastest horse in all Mexico."

They rode at a long lope back to the cantina. When within a few hundred yards they were challenged by the outpost guard.

"Where is Don Chino?" Pelon growled.

"Quien sabe, señor? He is gone. Vanished. Disappeared as if by the black devil's magic. His horse is here but he is gone."

" I ordered him to wait for me."

"He said he takes orders from nobody. He was laughing and there was fire in his eyes. Nothing we could say would prevent him from going. Alone."

They could hear the wild drunken ribald shouts of Olan Thorpe's renegades. They had the two Mexican musicians playing *La Cucaracha.* And Thorpe's bellowing voice was singing, leading the wild chorus. The verses were lewd.

Ryan Pryor's black-whiskered lips flattened in a hard, mirthless grin and his eyes were cold. "I am going alone." Ryan said. "It's the only bet, now. This is my passport."

Ryan had taken the gruesome pair of ears, caked with dried blood, from his shirt pocket and held them in the palm of his hand. "I'm claiming Olan Thorpe's bounty on Guzzmann's ears." Pelon offered quick protest. But Cabezon nodded his head. "You have your Mexicans surrounding the place, Pelon," said Cabezon. "Close in on Thorpe's renegades quietly."

"I will be somewhere within gunshot," Cabezon told Ryan, "when I am needed."

Ryan told Pelon not to worry about him. "It's a one man job. If anything happens to me, if I get killed and Chino is dead, take Dolores to my ranch in Colorado, Pelon. And to hell with the Santa Maria de los Dolores Grant. Too much blood has been shed already. Take her there where she'll be safe."

CHAPTER FOUR

Try on His Ears for Size

RYAN rode boldly up to the cantina hitch rack and swung from his saddle.

"It's that black muzzled Ryan hombre, Thorpe!" one of the armed guards outside shouted through the saloon doorway.

"Let Ryan come in!" Thorpe ordered.

Thorpe was leaning with his back against the bar and one bootheel was hooked in the brass rail. He waved a bottle of tequila. His right hand held one of his silver-handled six-shooters.

The renegades backed away, leaving a lane for Ryan. The bartender, a pock-marked Mexican, set out a bottle of tequila and a shot glass and salt shaker and a plate of halved green limes. He was a shade pale under his swarthy skin.

Ryan picked up the bottle. Ignoring the salt and halved limes, he tilted the bottle and drank from it, then set it down. He took the two blood-caked ears from his shirt pocket and laid them on the bar beside the bottle.

"The ears of the Jefe Guzzmann," Ryan said flatly.

Thorpe's scarred mouth twitched. His eyes held a crafty look. He picked up the bits of blood-caked gristle.

"Guzzmann's ears," Thorpe said. "Mebbyso. Mebbyso." He was looking at one of his renegades who stood in the doorway that led into the patio.

"Show Guzzmann in," Thorpe said. "We'll try these ears on for fit."

Guzzmann came into the doorway in his blood-spattered suit. A tight bandage was around his skull. He held a .38 Colt in each hand, pointed at Ryan's belly. "Yah!" Guzzmann spat. *"Yah wohl!* You will be rewarded, Thorpe!" Guzzmann cursed Ryan until his face was purple.

Ryan knew it was sudden death if he made a move for his six-shooter. He stood and took the cussing-out, hoping for a miracle. Somewhere out in the night, outside the open door and beyond the armed guards, a gun hammered.

Before the sound of the gun's explosion reached the inside of the saloon, those who watched Guzzmann saw a bullet hit the jefe just below the bandaged bridge of his nose. A hole appeared in his forehead. It spattered bone and blood out at the back of his skull.

For a long moment the dead man stood tracked, then his arms fell limply and the two guns slid from his lifeless grip. His knees gave way and his big bulk sagged and went down.

RYAN moved swiftly, without thinking. His gun was in his hand and one of his slugs tore through Thorpe's entrails just below the belt.

Then Ryan was lifted bodily by his shoulders and jerked off his feet and over the bar by the bartender. Ryan was dazed and he was falling into a pit and the blackness closed above him. He landed with a heavy crash, bartender on top of him. Ryan was jerked onto his feet and a hand was on his arm, yanking him through a black tunnel.

"Grab the back of my belt, señor. On your hands and knees. We crawl now. Is a trap door. Planks laid on planks to make the trap door twelve inches thick. Heavy bolts fasten it. Those hombres don't know where this tunnel comes out. Pronto!"

"You and the two musicians had Guzzmann on ice. How'd he get loose with them two guns?"

"Was simple enough, señor. Guzzmann had money to buy them musicians. They set him free and he paid them. They gave him his two guns and he shoved them two guns into their two bellies and took the money back. It paid those two cabrons off as they deserved." The bartender snorted.

The tunnel had a musty odor. It seemed endless. They halted and Ryan found he could stand erect. The bartender said there was a ladder that led up in the box stall of the barn where the palomino stud was stabled.

They climbed the ladder and the Mexican bartender shoved open a heavy trap door and they were in a small two-stall barn. The palomino stud was in the box stall. He still had Ryan's saddle on. Another horse was in the other box stall.

"Quien es?" a voice whispered.

"Amigos! I have brought the Señor Ryan."

"Valgate Dios! God bless you, amigo!"

It was the voice of Dolores. She was close to Ryan now there in the darkness, and Ryan's arms went around her.

"Only Pelon and Cabezon know about the tunnel. They told me and I hid there. I put my trust in this good friend and he did not fail me. He brought you safe here to me. You are not hurt, Ryan?"

"Olan Thorpe's bullet just barely missed me, but I didn't miss him. He's dead. Or dying." Ryan's hold on the girl tightened. "Listen!"

Outside the dobe barn came the sound of gunfire.

"Is that Don Chino! Pelon tried to stop him. He has gone loco!"

Ryan opened the barn door cautiously and looked out. Chino, riding in the lead of his Mexican vaqueros, was like a madman. He was spurring his horse to a run, firing as he charged the cantina.

Chino would charge straight for the swinging half doors of the saloon, emptying his gun into the dark saloon. Then when his gun was empty, he would spur back behind shelter and reload. The vaqueros would ride behind him and empty their guns into the dark saloon. The guns inside would return the fire.

Olan Thorpe, gutshot and dying, blocked the patio doorway, guns gripped in his hands. He sat with his knees doubled up and his back against the wall. He would lay down one gun and grab a bottle of tequila and drink.

"Fight, you curly wolves. I'll kill any man who tries to rabbit!"

"That Thorp's hard to kill," Ryan said. Then he stepped outside. "Hi! Chino!"

Chino whirled his blowing, sweaty horse, then spurred towards the barn.

"*Por Dios!* Compadre Rynie!" Chino was off his horse and both arms were around Ryan.

"Three times now, Compadre Rynie, you are een my debts!" Chino let go and started to mount his horse.

"I am only one time een your debts. When I take that saddle gun from Cabezon and I shoot Guzzmann dead center between hees eyes. Then I hand the gon back to Cabezon.

" 'Ees a good gon, Cabezon,' " I say. 'I am een debts to Rynie Pryors and I am wipe off one tally mark.' "

"You stay here, Chino." Ryan gripped his arm. "Olan Thorpe is gutshot, dying. Those other renegades don't matter. Don't risk your life when there's no need."

Pelon rode up. He yanked the bridle reins from Chino's hand.

"That's right, Pelon. Set him afoot. Chino, you're bleeding.

"Ees nothing. Scratches."

From the patio sounded the deep bell-toned voice of Cabezon. "Adios, Gringo Thorpe!"

Then Thorpe's bellow was choked off into a rattling, then to eternal silence.

"Cabezon's machete," said Pelon.

Cabezon's was shouting orders to a few Yaquis he had kept with him. They charged into the saloon, over the dead bodies of Guzzmann and the decapitated carcass of Olan Thorpe. The fight turned into a Yaqui massacre. Those who sought escape by way of the front door were shot by Pelon's Mexicans. It was all over in less than a quarter of an hour.

A WEEK later at the old pueblo of Tucson, Arizona Territory, Ryan Pryor and Maria de los Dolores del Castillo were married in front of the altar at the old Mission of San Xavier del Bac.

Chino, his wounds dressed and bandaged, stood near Ryan, while Pelon in a new charro jacket and pants made of soft leather, gave the bride in marriage. Cabezon sat with a few of his Yaquis and Pelon's Mexicans in the old church pews.

Pelon was taking Chino back to the Santa Maria de los Dolores Grant. Raphael Eduardo Francisco del Castillo had come into his own. The presidente of Mexico would renew the Spanish Grant.

Ryan Pryor was taking his bride north to Colorado, to the Quarter Circle P home ranch. It was in accordance with the wishes of his bride Dolores.

"Mexico is bloodstained. Wet with too many tears. Take me where it is safe, so that I can raise my children in peace and happiness."

Pelon was in agreement. He told them that when the boy called Chino reached his twenty-first birthday he had written him to return. That he had made a solemn oath in the name of the del Castillos to restore the youngest and only survivor of the del Castillos to the Santa Maria de los Dolores Grant. He had kept the deed to the Spanish grant safely all these years.

"This boy and I," said old Pelon, "have much to do. Peace is restored. The Mexicans who have remained faithful to the del Castillos shall be rewarded. We will give them fertile land and build homes and they shall prosper. There will be music and fiestas. And one day this Chino will claim himself a bride to carry on the name of del Castillo." Pelon's black eyes lighted up.

Chino grinned at Ryan, his dark eyes shining. "Regarding thees debts you owe me, Compadre Rynie. I am somehow confused and mixed up."

"They are canceled," smiled Dolores. "I shall be the mother of children. The first child will be a boy. We will call him Chino. And you, my brother, shall be his godfather. And it will be our solemn duty to always be in what you call his debts to the boy Chino."

"It takes a woman," Chino told Pelon and Cabezon as they rode along together, headed for Old Mexico and the Santa Maria de los Dolores Grant, "to figure such theengs out. When Rynie Pryors saves the life of Chino, he put himself in debts to me. My life belong to Rynie. He must always look after me to keep my life safe. He save me three times now. Then, behold, I save Rynie's life when I keel that cabron Guzzmann. I theenk I must save hees life two more times to be even." Chino shook his head puzzled.

"It takes a woman like Dolores to figure out such theengs. *Sta beuno.* We are no more een the debts!"

THE END

REBELS NEVER DIE!

By
JOHN H. HOLLAND

When they make a fighting man a spy, he's a true-blue Damnyankee—especially if he's a butternut-clad Rebel!

THE stranger came to Credon City the day all those Yankees heard about Chancellorsville. He was thin and blond in a faded blue shirt and he stood up to the bar at Hogan's, tossing down drinks. I didn't know why, but he looked troublesome.

For me, things were kind of nervous. Chancellorsville was good news, but I couldn't show it and that was a strain. And Ike Creel had come over and said they'd be moving the gold at midnight.

I saw one of the miners fly back from the bar, bent like a half-open jack-knife

That meant I had to get word to the boys in the hills so they could rob the freight. But I still couldn't figure the stranger, so I hung around, watching him.

He tossed off his third drink and then grabbed at the rim of the bar with those long straight hands of his that had never curled around a pick and started bellering out a song. It was a sort of tributary of *Suwanee River* and he let it out loud and round.

"Way down upon the Su-wanee ri-iver. . .
Far, far away. . ."

It shut up everyone in the room.

If he was looking for trouble, the stranger couldn't have picked a better place or a better time. Every mine around was having trouble freighting their gold and the rumor all over the Colorado country was that the hills were full of secesh spies. And they were right.

So the stranger didn't get any farther than Suwanee before half a dozen of those big Irish miners began taking off their coats to lay down the law. It worked into one hell of a fight.

I ran across toward the bar, fighting my way toward the stranger, grabbing collars and shirts and swinging miners out of the way across the floor. The stranger wasn't looking for trouble. He was looking for me. He'd sung *Suwanee*.

But that's all the good it did the stranger.

I'm six-two and I take a big horse, but beating against a bunch of miners' backs in the middle of a place like Hogan's when they're spoiling for southern blood, that takes more than a man my size. But the stranger was doing a good enough job. I saw one of those miners fly back from the bar, bent like a half open jack-knife, both hands hugging his belly where a boot had caught him. He flew a good four feet before he slammed into one of Hogan's tables. He went to the floor in a crash of wood and flying poker chips.

You could feel the floor shake under your feet, all those miners thumping around. And the piano player started banging out what must have been a Union tune, but you couldn't tell because he was so scared and excited, all he got was a bunch of sour notes. Then one of the miners who wasn't close enough to do any good that he could brag about later, let go with a bottle at Hogan's back bar.

He caught the mirror and it came crashing down off the wall. A hundred dollars worth of whiskey spilled out on the floor. So that gave me all the excuse I'd need for helping a secesh in a fight with a bunch of Union miners in a Colorado town. The fight was busting up Hogan's place and I was Credon City marshal and supposed to keep the peace.

I backed away and grabbed my .44. I pulled the hammer off the empty chamber and thumbed three holes into the roof.

One minute Hogan's place sounded like Jeb Stuart's cavalry pounding across the top of a big bass drum and the next minute you could have heard a caterpillar breathing. Except for the whiskey spilling from a turned over bottle on Hogan's back bar.

They all had their eyes on me and they stood there with their chests sunk in and their arms hanging wide at their sides, still quivering mad. And wondering what kind of a marshal I was that wouldn't let them have their fun. Then the spilling whiskey streamed from a gurgle to a hum of drumming drops on the wood.

It seemed like spilled whiskey was petering out to a pretty feeble excuse for stopping the fight. But the only thing to do was play it through, counting on a little help from Creel. So I leveled my .44 at those miners' stomachs. Then I looked at the stranger. "All right, Suwanee," I said. "We're taking a walk."

HE DIDN'T say anything. He looked at the miners and bent to pick up his hat. He straightened up and jammed his shirt in and stood there staring at me. Then the miners began to rumble.

Creel moved out of the middle of them and walked across to me, playing it tough. He was foreman of the Linda Lou and he knew I wouldn't shoot. Creel was a Reb spy. Not for love. For money. And plenty of it. I paid him every two weeks, regular, and whenever he could give me a lead on a gold shipment, he got a bonus. He was right on the job.

"He's a Reb," said Creel. "Keep out of our fight, Marshal."

There was a murmur from the miners

behind him that agreed with what he had to say. But Creel was playing it right. I hauled back the hammer on my .44.

"He's drunk, Creel. A man sings *Suwanee River,* that doesn't prove he's secesh. All it proves is Hogan's place gets busted up. Now if you want to get locked up too—"

From the look of him, you wouldn't say Creel liked that. He curled his lip and played hero to the rest of the miners. "Try and lock me up, O'Hara."

He could carry a good thing too far, so I tried to shut it off.

"I'm taking him to Colonel Briggs, Creel. Shut up, or you go along for a dose of army law."

That was all talk for the miners. But I saw I'd made a mistake. A gleam sneaked into Creel's eyes and he turned that black head of his and winked at one of the miners on his left. "Do that, Marshal. Take me along. We might run into Miss Betsy Briggs."

They all laughed and I stood there feeling foolish. Sore at Creel, but needing him and having to give him credit for getting me out of a tight. He had the miners laughing because they all knew I'd jailed Betsy by mistake that time when Hogan's fancy girls got in a fight and caused a riot over a piece of gingham down at Johnson's store. Most of the miners knew how the colonel would act around me, but I played it out.

"All right, Creel," I said. "Get your hat."

He turned around, cocky, and walked over and got it. The miners looked at me and snickered, none of them dangerous anymore, so I went over to Suwanee.

"We're leaving."

He looked up at me, studying me close. It might have been that I'd mentioned Colonel Briggs and that scared him, or it might have been the fighting that made him look so tired. And that was funny enough to make me feel a little better. I wondered what he'd look like when Creel and I got him outside and let him in on who was secesh around Credon City and who wasn't. Not that we'd let him in on it outright. You can't be too careful and no one had told me to be looking for a man like Suwanee. But I hoped there'd be enough fun in it to keep me from popping off at Creel. I still needed him at the Linda Lou and it wouldn't do to get sore at him and have him spill all he knew. The boys needed that Union gold pretty bad and it had taken me a long time to get things going smooth. But that's the trouble with fighting a war the way I was. You have to work with what you can get and sometimes the best you can get is a man like Creel.

So Creel and Suwanee and I walked out of there, Creel playing it cocky, Suwanee tight in the mouth and really scared and me acting like a marshal in a Union town.

We got out of Hogan's with the miners snickering at me and we started up the street toward the jail. Creel kept playing up to all the miners he saw along the way, clucking like you would to a horse and jerking his shoulders in a fake laugh. He'd point his thumb back at me and yell out to handy miners that the marshal was taking him down and wasn't that rare?

I let him have his fun. He'd be spending the night in jail and at least that meant I wouldn't have to worry about where he'd be when it came to rob the gold. I was even thinking I might have to dock him his bonus, just to keep him from getting too showy. But Suwanee didn't know what to make of him.

I saw him look kind of sideways at Creel a couple of times and I just about had my mind made up to put them in separate cells so Suwanee wouldn't jump Creel before he had a chance to say what it was all about, when Colonel Briggs and Betsy came along in a buckboard, headed home from Spotswoods' supper. Creel saw them too.

He stopped in the middle of the street and took off his hat. The colonel pulled up and Creel bowed low. "Cunnel, suh," he said, waving the hat at me, "the marshal here is arrestin' me for a secesh spy. I'll see yo all in the mawnin'."

HE DIDN'T have to lay it on that thick. And when he straightened up grinning, I would have pushed his face in if it hadn't been for Miss Betsy laughing. I could see she thought that was silly, that a man like Creel could be a spy. And I saw that he'd done some good, one way.

Colonel Briggs cleared his throat and pulled in his chin. "Is that correct, Mr.

O'Hara. He looked at me from slitted eyes.

"No, sir," I said. "There was a fight up at Hogan's." I waved my gun at Suwanee. "This man started singing *Suwanee River* and the miners lit into him. I busted it up and nothing would satisfy Creel but he came along."

The colonel chewed his tongue and frowned down at Suwanee. He looked him over for a good long time and then he cleared his throat.

"Proceed with your arrest, Mr. O'Hara."

"Yes, sir."

That sobered Creel. He quit being so cocky and he looked first at the colonel and then at me. And the colonel slapped the reins along the back of his team and the buckboard rattled on down the hill.

I proceeded with the arrest.

And Creel didn't give me any more trouble. He didn't so much as open his mouth until we got down to the jail and I'd put Suwanee in a cell and closed the office door.

He was sitting in my chair with his feet on the desk, looking mad. That didn't make me feel any more kindly toward him and I walked from the door over to him, fit to kill.

"Now you've done it," I said.

"Done what? I got you out of Hogan's."

"And rung in Colonel Briggs."

Creel looked disgusted. "Use your head. You rung in Briggs, not me. I'd of had to of seen him in the morning to keep the men from thinking. Nothin' hurt by the bit I done."

"You showed off, plain and simple."

He spread his hands. "So I spend the night in jail."

"You're damned right you do. And there isn't room for a show-off working for me."

Creel dropped his feet to the floor and stood up. He walked over to the shelf and pulled out an extra blanket. "I thought of that," he said. "You ain't firing me." Then he walked to the door and stopped. "You got reasons not to."

He opened the door and walked down to an empty cell. He swung the bars back and threw the extra blanket on the bed and lay down, the cage door still swung wide. He was daring me to come down and lock it. Maybe I shouldn't have, but I went down and slammed it shut. He knew he was fired.

Colonel Briggs came in about ten minutes after Creel quieted down. About a quarter to nine.

He was all business. He pulled off his dress gloves a finger at a time and slapped them across my desk. "O'Hara! Take me to that man who sang."

Any other marshal could have got up and demanded more respect. But with the gold moving out at midnight and the boys still to be told, I wasn't like any other marshal. I stood up. "Yes, sir."

I walked him back to Suwanee's cell. Creel was standing up close to the bars and I could tell he'd been talking to Suwanee from the look on both their faces. And I don't think either of them had thought to see the colonel so soon.

The colonel pointed at Creel. "Remove that man."

I went over and unlocked Creel's cell and we walked out of there, into the office. I started to go back to the colonel, but he stood there stiff as a board at eyes right, looking at me.

"I'll see the prisoner alone," he said harshly.

I shrugged my shoulders and backed through the door and closed it. That meant I had a hell of a big change in my plans.

I'd been thinking I could rig an escape with Suwanee and have him get word to the boys in the hills. But with the colonel working on him, I could see the only way was to do it myself or send Creel. That meant I'd have to hire him back because I knew the colonel would want me around, now that he'd started working on Suwanee. I walked over to the desk and looked at Creel.

"How much did you tell him?"

"Nothin' he couldn't have guessed," said Creel. "He come in singing Suwanee. How'd he get onto that if he didn't know it was the password?"

"You tell him about tonight?"

"Hell, no," said Creel. "All I told him was he was in the right camp and who I was."

"Nothing about me?"

Creel looked at the floor. "I figured you'd get around to that," he said.

THAT didn't sound a whole lot like the truth. I had a hunch Creel had told Suwanee everything. And I knew for sure he wasn't telling me everything he should have. But I was pressed for time. I had to get word to the boys in the hills. So I made another mistake.

"All right, Creel. You're hired back. I won't be able to leave as long as the colonel's snooping so it's up to you to get out to the boys any way you can. Tell them about tonight. Do it now and get back here to jail as soon as you can."

That put some life back in Creel. It was a chance for him to play hero to the men in the hills and he liked that. He walked right across the room and out the door without so much as saying he'd see me.

So that left me alone and wondering about the colonel and how far he'd got with Suwanee. And how much Suwanee really knew. I kept kicking myself for ever getting Creel mixed up in it. And I wished a lot of things.

I wished I was back where the real war was instead of out here where you never could tell that anything you did was any good. And I wished it was tomorrow and we had the gold and I wished the colonel would get out of that cell so I could get in there and talk to Suwanee.

I didn't have long to wait.

Colonel Briggs came slamming through the door with fire in his eyes. Suwanee was right behind him.

The colonel looked once around the room and when he saw I was alone his face got red and he pulled in his chin and showed his teeth. "O'Hara! Where's Creel?"

"I turned him loose. He didn't do anything bad enough to hold him for."

The colonel opened his hands like he was going for my throat. "Fool!" he yelled. "Fool! Fool! That man is a Reb spy. And you turn him loose!"

So he knew and things were out of hand. But I played it dumb, mostly from habit. I argued. "He couldn't be. He's foreman at the Linda Lou."

Colonel Briggs whirled around to face Suwanee.

"Lieutenant Crook! Tell the marshal."

Suwanee clicked his heels and nodded his head once, very military. That made it all as clear as could be. He was a Union officer, spying on us. He reeled off his story.

"Mr. Creel told me in the cell that he was a Reb spy and that he'd organized a band of raiders who intend to rob the gold tonight. At midnight, he said."

"You see, O'Hara?" said the colonel. "You fool!"

I saw a lot more than the colonel thought. I saw that Creel had been showing off again and I saw that I had to get to the boys in the hills because the colonel would get smart and set up a trap if Creel got to them and they heard about the gold. The colonel wouldn't wait a minute. And there'd be as bloody an ambush as any bunch of Indians ever cooked up. The colonel was spoiling for a fight just the same as everyone else. So there was only one thing to do: See to it that the boys never found out about tonight's gold shipment. See to it that they stayed in the hills where the army wouldn't touch them. Then when they heard the news they could vote themselves a new leader and keep on robbing gold.

I went over to my chair and sat down. I put my feet up on the desk and hauled out my .44. I threw it across to the floor at Suwanee's feet and looked the colonel right in the eye.

"He was lying, Colonel. The only secesh spy anywhere around is me. James T. O'Hara, Credon City Marshal. I hired Creel to tell me when they'd be shipping gold. If you want him, he'll need a horse from Simpson's Livery before he can clear town."

The colonel didn't waste a minute. "Lieutenant Crook! Get Creel."

Crook ducked down and snatched up my gun and charged out the door. The colonel turned to me. "O'Hara, you're under arrest."

I thought that was plain enough. But the colonel had the floor and I wasn't going to distract him. If he had time to think, he might realize what he'd done. If Crook caught Creel, there'd be no one around to lead the colonel into the hills. I sat there praying Creel would get caught.

And the colonel went on about how I was a prisoner of war and how Creel and I would be taken out and shot, first thing in the morning. I didn't mind listening to that as long as it kept his mind occupied.

But that was the longest time I ever spent anywhere, waiting for Crook to come back with Creel.

I GUESS I was a fool to spend the time I did. The colonel didn't have a gun. He'd been to Spotwoods' and it wasn't nice to go to supper parties armed. But under the circumstances, it wouldn't have been smart for me to get up and walk out. If I'd pulled something like that, they'd have been bound to get smart and follow me to the men. The only thing I could do was sit there and watch the colonel strut, sweating blood while I wondered if Crook would catch Creel.

He didn't.

There must have been a good five minutes go by and then all of a sudden we heard a gun go off twice and a horse pound down the street past the jail. Then we heard Crook shout "Stop that man!" and a bunch of the miners started yelling.

The colonel ran over toward the door. I saw what I had to do. I jumped up out of my chair and ran across and slammed against his back. If Creel had got away, that meant I had to get to the men and call off the hold up. So I hit the colonel as hard in the back as I could and tried to get my hands on his throat. I couldn't do it. He was older, but you spend your life in the saddle and you get tough. The colonel was.

His muscles were like wire. His arms reached back until one of them locked around my head. Then he took the other hand and began to work at my ear, twisting it around like you would a mule you were shoeing. We rolled along toward the door, me banging him down as hard against the floor as I could, and him screaming at the top of his lungs: "Crook! Lieutenant Crook!"

I rolled around until I had my body on top of him across his head. That shut him up a little. But it didn't make him let go of my head. He kept banging it down against the floor and those hard old legs of his kept coming up and trying to hook in mine to pull me off the top of him.

He had my left hand held under his right arm and my right arm was behind him so I couldn't get at his throat. But I could still roll him and I got him going toward the desk. He kept kicking at it with his feet and that shoved us along the floor, over toward the door back to the cells.

He held my throat up to where I was facing the door and my weight across him had put his head close to the floor just across the door jam. I could see what I had to do.

I reached up with both feet and caught the door knob between my boots. Then I pulled toward me as hard as I could.

The door slammed against his head.

It didn't do the job right away. But it loosened him a little and I kicked back again and slammed the door against his head again.

He went limp.

I got up on my knees and grabbed his collar and hit him on the point of the jaw to make sure. I hit him as hard as I could.

Then I dragged him back to Creel's cell and dumped him on the bed. I covered him with both blankets and slammed the cell door. I turned and ran.

Crook stood in the door with my gun in his hand. He hadn't seen me. He was looking over his shoulder back into the night. But he had the door blocked. There wasn't any way out. And he had my gun.

He was excited about something. And I could hear the miners yelling up the street. That meant Creel had got away. He'd get to the men and all I could do was hope that he was bright enough to see what had happened and not try to come in after the gold. But I knew he wouldn't be. And all I had to do was get past Crook.

I didn't even try to keep it quiet. I just ran at him.

And I knew right after I'd started running that I didn't stand a chance.

WHIRLING, he reached across to thumb off a shot at me, just as I slammed into him. I could feel my gun jab into my stomach and it almost knocked the breath out of me. But I must have knocked his hand away from the hammer and we banged back into the wall.

Then I felt that long barrel hook inside my belt.

I tried squirming away from him, grabbing his right arm, but the gun stayed right there, caught. I was going to get gut-shot.

Pressing in close, I squirmed desperate-

ly to keep his hand away from the gun, but he was strong. He wrenched his arm out of my hand and I could feel his hand slide down, searching for the gun.

I kept squirming and trying to grab his hand and keep it away from the gun. And then I broke free with my right hand. I got him by the throat.

I choked him as hard as I could, slamming his head back against the wall. But then he got his free hand on the gun.

I felt it slip around the butt and I felt his thumb dig into my stomach and pull the hammer back. And I thought, All right, I'd get killed. But a gut-shot wouldn't kill me right away and there was one Suwanee singing snake I'd take along with me. So I choked him harder.

Then I felt his thumb slip off the hammer and his fist tighten around, squeezing the trigger. I pressed in closer and choked until I could almost feel my fingers touching and banged his head with all I had back against the wall. I drove my lowest rib hard against the hammer, trying desperately to hold it back, but he wrenched it away. I could feel him squeeze the trigger.

Nothing happened.

The hammer banged down against the empty chamber. But I kept on choking him anyway. And he took his hand off the gun and swung his fist.

There was a blinding red flash and I could feel my brain rattle against the inside of my skull. But I hung on. I banged his head back against the wall again and brought my other hand up and put the heel of it under his nose. I shoved up with all I had left.

His head almost went through the wall. And his knees sagged and I knew I had him whipped. We fell together.

HE WASN'T out. But it was close. And I'll say one thing for him. He kept trying to get up. He was game.

But I was tired. I would have hit him again to make sure he stayed down, but I didn't have it in me to raise my fist. I knew it would be all I could do to get up and get out of there.

But I made it finally, clawing my way up the wall and I stood there, trying to get my knees stiffened.

The gun was still jammed in my belt.

I thought I could make sure he'd stay down if I just lifted it out and dropped it on him. So I dragged my hand up and got it around the butt. Then I heard the miners.

They were coming down the hill sounding like a swarm of bees and the first one wasn't ten yards outside the door.

I lifted my foot and got it over Crook and stepped outside the door. I tried to get squared away so I could fight through them, but I couldn't get my knees under me. And there were too many. That was all there was to it.

But it turned out I was wrong there. And lucky. The first miner stepped up to me and looked me over.

"Marshal? You all right?"

I tried to straighten up and tell him yeah, to go ahead and lock me up. But I couldn't get any wind. I couldn't say a word. And there's where I was lucky.

That miner took one look at me and turned to the mob. "Look what he's done to the marshal, boys. He's sung his last Suwanee! Get him!"

And they swarmed past me and pounced on Crook, lying in the door. They were like a pack of hungry vultures, moving in on the dead. So I was lucky enough to be out of breath. I didn't have to be told what to do next.

I just drifted away.

I got up the street all right and I got me a horse and I made it out to the boys, worse for wear, but I made it. In time too. It must have taken those miners a good while to figure what had happened because we had time to move camp and we haven't had a lick of trouble since.

Only there's been some changes.

Now they call us O'Hara's Hares for the way we move around and it's more like fighting an honest war. We've had a brush or two with the army, just like back east, and we've got sixty thousand in dust and a letter from Jeff Davis saying to keep up the good work.

We took a vote on Creel and decided to fire him for sure and the last we saw he was headed west over the divide. But we haven't forgotten him.

We changed the password from Suwanee to Show-off.

By
GIFF CHESHIRE

Some men are tougher than the deadliest hired dry-gulcher of a bloody cowman-nester war: Beware a gunman who turns the other cheek!

CHAPTER ONE

Worse Than Nester War!

HE CAME out of the draw to find his little bunch of steers halted. It took only a look to see the shiny strands of new barbed wire. Three riders sat beyond the fence, Bruce McLain between his cowhands. They stared at Lex Whittier, not working too hard at concealing their amusement.

Lex rode through the bunched steers. He halted his horse and stared at the fence, which ran from one side across the draw and blocked the gap completely. Rising rims on either side completed the barrier. There was no other route to A-O without going the long way that followed the creek. It was too hot for that, even if he could stomach truckling to this greenhorn cowman in the dude clothes.

Lex thought it over and lifted a cool gaze to Bruce McLain's eyes.

The man grinned at him. "Too bad you didn't get here sooner, Whittier. We just closed the draw."

"You can open it again," Lex snapped.

THE GREENHORN-FIGHTING MADMAN

FRONTIER NOVELETTE

Lex drew his gun and fired a shot in the air

"A-O's been using this draw for years. Saves time coming and going to our government lease."

"We don't build fences just to tear them out for some lazy cowpoke," McLain retorted. "The habit of driving across my range at will has got to stop. That may be unneighborly, but it's essential to the operation I intend to run."

"You better tear out that fence," Lex said. His voice was easy.

"Whittier, now's a good time to get used to going around," McLain said.

Lex still kept his voice free of the heat he felt. "McLain, you're new. In this country we get to know each other's habits and respect 'em. Nobody minds if somebody happens to cross his grass to save time and trouble."

Bruce McLain had a resonant, educated voice. He hadn't lifted it either. There was even amusement on his good-looking young face. "I mind, Whittier. And I thought the people around here understood I've bought the land on this side of the hills. I intend to fence everything that isn't naturally enclosed. In fact, I've got to. Sorry, but that's the way it stands." He was tall, as big as Lex, and he wore fancy britches and boots and an expensive Stetson. The typical get-up of a greenhorn easterner. He looked quite a lot like his sister, whom Lex had met one night

in town. Whittier figured her very pretty.

Lex swung down. Though big, he was light-footed, always saving himself motion. He stepped through the barbed wire and came up to McLain, who stared down at him guardedly. He reached for McLain before the man knew what was coming, got him by the belt and jerked him hard. McLain came loose, though he twisted and tried to slam a fist into Lex's face. Then he fell.

Lex shoved back, legs spread, and waited for him to rise. McLain came up with astonishment and a boiling anger on his face. His two riders were on the point of swinging down, but McLain motioned for them to stay put.

"We'll dicker," Lex said. "If I can lick you, you open the fence."

"I'll be damned," McLain breathed. He was shaken and raging, yet he grinned. "If you can whip me, I open the fence."

A wild fire broke in Lex that was not his temper but a wholly new thing. Since that night in Broad Oaks he had wondered how it would turn out if they ever squared off at each other.

McLain came in fast, driving Lex half a dozen scuffing steps backward, his boots lifting the red volcanic dust. The man had steam, spunk and skill, and Lex had seen it at work once before. That time, oddly, they had sided each other though it was a matter of accident. On behalf of McLain's sister Valerie. Lex recalled the incident as he hammered McLain to a standstill, then got him backing up.

LEX noted that the two punchers kept saddle, interested and willing to stay neutral, a pair McLain had brought in from somewhere. McLain clinched to get his balance, and the tie-up was something Lex wasn't used to. All the man's fighting was controlled, precise. Scientific stuff, and Lex had a rough man's contempt for it. But he had seen it in action, learned its devastation, and had secretly yearned ever since to test his own skill against it.

He used the clinch to get McLain's head under his arm, keeping him off balance. He got his elbows against the back of the man's shoulders and began to force him into a sharp bend, holding McLain helpless and applying his full weight against the other's lift. With a quick catch, he got his hands clamped onto McLain's hard-muscled sides. Then he brought the man's entire weight up from the ground, with threshing legs uppermost. A puncher swore on a note of wonder.

Lex straightened in a heavy lift that would have been impossible to many men, bringing McLain over his head and letting go. The man somersaulted and crashed in a heap, belly down in the tramped dust. Lex swung around, panting heavily. McLain had had a taste of barroom brawling and lay slack and dazed. Then he shoved partly up, only to groan and fall flat again.

Walking over, Lex took a look at him. He shot a glance at the watching punchers.

"He's licked. Swing open that fence."

McLain's move surprised him completely. Without trying to rise, he grabbed for Lex's legs, caught them and came up. He made an astounding, deadweight lift, getting onto his knees and to a stand with Lex trying helplessly to get a balancing grip on him. He jiggled himself, like a man settling a sack of oats across his shoulders, an arm in Lex's crotch and the other locked about his neck. He whirled, bent forward, making the same cruel, free cast. Lex saw the ground rush at him and could do nothing to break the fall.

He made his own paralyzed push to rise. It didn't work, and McLain had sense enough to stand clear.

"He's whipped," McLain said. "And the fence is there for good."

Lex staggered to a stand, saw McLain rush forward, and fought to clear his head. He drove out his fists and pawed forward, and they met in a crash. He lost track of time, after that, as he tested the full fury of that precise pounding. Fists slashed through his guard, slammed into him and kept him rocking on his feet. He got beyond trying to protect himself, determined to knock the mounting confidence out of McLain.

He checked McLain's drive, glimpsed an opening and put all he had behind his hickorylike knuckles. He saw McLain's head snap back, but the man stayed on his feet, surged forward. Something tried to blast the square point off Lex's jaw. He knew it had finished him, and the dusty ground came up in another rush.

He didn't go out, but lay with his

sweating face in the red dust. He kept shoving up on his elbows but they would break and drop him. To his astonishment he saw McLain stagger backward, then sit down in a dead fall and slump forward with his head on his knees. Presently McLain raised his head and they stared at each other for a long moment.

"Draw," McLain muttered. "We open the fence this once. But that's all." He pulled a sleeve along his bloody mouth.

Lex got up and tried to beat some of the dust from his clothes. Entirely willing, McLain's punchers opened the fence and drove the steers and saddle horse through. Lex mounted and stared down at the dude cowman, with a grudging liking for what he saw.

"McLain, you're all right," he said. "But you better take warning. The next jigger that finds himself stopped by your fences is apt to rip one out. You'll put it back, and before you know it you'll be in hot water. There was nesters on this property last year. Reckon you heard what induced 'em to sell it to you. They didn't put up any fences. In fact, I don't see as they gave anybody any trouble. But a cowman just don't like a nester chopping up the range. So they went. And you're asking for the same."

"I'm here to stay," McLain said. "Whittier, with a little work, I could make you a fighter who could whip me. That's a thing I'm not going to do." The warning seemed to have rolled off of him without any effect.

LEX rode home behind his bunch with mixed feelings. He was going to like Bruce McLain, like he had cottoned to the sister, and neither attitude was going to be healthy. He kept remembering Valerie McLain and how he had met her. He had been in town for the mail, and an outfit of drivers had been there for the night. A tough, shifty-eyed bunch. They had overdone the job of cutting dust from their throats with Broad Oak's bad whiskey.

Lex had come out of a restaurant just as Valerie passed by three of the trail crew, who leaned against a hitch rack and heckled passersby. A big, rough-looking individual had made some remark to her, to which she reacted with an astonished, angry toss of the head. The fellow had the bad judgment to lay a hand on her shoulder. Lex saw that and was in motion.

His first punch knocked the man over the hitch rack. All three had piled onto him then. Then it was that Bruce McLain ran out of a store across the street and pitched in. Together they cleaned up the trail trio, and it had been a whale of a scrap.

Lex turned the little bunch of steers into a sorting pen at A-O, unsaddled and put his horse in with the day band. When he went across the compound to the little office Anse Osgood used, he saw three horses wearing neighborhood brands at the hitching post.

Four men stared at him when he stepped into the ranch office. "Where's the cougar carcass?" Kirk Winkly demanded. His spread was just below A-O. "From the fracas you been in you should have drug one home. Or the cougar should have drug yours home."

"Fell off my horse," Lex grunted. An answer like that was enough to discourage inquiry with most cowmen, and it worked now.

Anse Osgood was canted back in a chair with his feet on the desk. He was a cold, abstract man, whose relish derived entirely from hard facts and figures. It gave him a grim competence that had made him the biggest stockman in the vicinity. Osgood studied Lex's battered face and dusty clothes, but made no comment on that.

"Our neighbors here have got their dander up," he said to Lex. "Seems that eastern cuss that bought out the nester colony's took to barbwire fences. They want to organize and give McLain an utimatum that he can respect range custom or clear out. We were just chewing it over. Me, I'm against that kind of tactics and always have been. Stayed out of the nester trouble and have always been glad of it."

Lex stared at him. This wasn't the first time he had heard Anse Osgood carefully point out his own righteousness. The big puncher figured a man didn't have to make a practice of that if being white came to him naturally. And it wasn't usual for an owner to introduce a plain hired hand

into the conversation this way. Lex had figured he ought to report on the fenced draw, but now he had turned defensive and curious. He wasn't going to say anything until the others had left. And he knew Osgood had used him to point out his careful restraint to the others.

KIRK WINKLY pulled up his shoulders, scowling. "You can talk tolerance all you want, Anse. But to my mind McLain and his barbwire's worse than them damned nesters. I don't like his fencin' a-tall. Let that get started, and the first thing you know a man won't be able to turn around without hookin' the seat outta his pants." He was a lean, leathery old-timer, one of those who had come in on an open range. He grouched, Lex knew, at any innovation against the old, freehanded ways.

Another man spoke up bitterly. "First time somebody gets some beef ground into sausage on them fences, hell's going to pop. And I'll help pop it." He walked out, the others following.

Osgood filled his pipe, occupying himself until they had ridden off. Then he said, "Well, what happened to you?"

"McLain has fenced the draw we always use coming down from the lease," Lex said.

"You pull up his fence and get caught at it?" Osgood frowned. "We don't want any trouble with our neighbors."

"They were there when I hit it," Lex said. "We sort of flipped a coin. It lit on edge, and McLain opened the draw for me. Said it was only this once. Thought I ought to tell you."

Osgood shook his head and sighed. "Then I reckon we'll have to get used to going around."

"You going to knuckle down?"

"It's his land, ain't it? Don't like his high-handed, greenhorn ways a-tall, but we got to respect his rights. We'll try to be good neighbors, even if he won't. After this, go around when you're up that way. I'll have Humpy tell the other boys."

Something was keeping that strange feeling between Lex's shoulders. He said, "That's being mighty mild and reasonable, Anse. Some men'd be pretty goaty about that piece of land, in your boots. I sort of got the notion you had your eye on it, after the neighbors run the nesters off. Figured you had a bitter pill to swallow when they up and sold it in one package to Bruce McLain. A lot of men'd be graveled at McLain about that."

"McLain beat me, and more power to him," Osgood said. Yet he was staring at Lex with a shrewd light in his eyes.

Lex spread his hands and shrugged. "You even took a mighty fair attitude toward the nesters, when the government up and sold 'em a big piece of land you and Winkly'd been using for years. Wouldn't have a thing to do with runnin' 'em off. Kirk Winkly, he went ahead and organized the rest and done it."

Taking the pipe from his mouth, Osgood stared at Lex. "You trying to rowel me for some reason?"

"Why, no," Lex said. "Just admire a man who can be fair when everybody else is hooking around with his dander up."

Osgood looked thoughtful, scratching his whiskered jaw. "We're staying out of neighborhood squabbles," he snapped, and his manner dismissed his puncher.

LEX was questioning his own good sense when he went over to the bunkhouse and washed up for supper. It was simply the feeling Anse Osgood always gave him that had pulled that out of him. The nester fight had been a dirty one, too dirty for Lex Whittier though A-O had kept out of it. It had been an organized colony that nobody knew existed until it moved in on land to which it already held government patents. After a year of harassment by the cowman neighbors, it moved out again just as fast. With Bruce McLain appearing, bringing a new factor just as disagreeable to the cow country.

It was the man Osgood had picked for his ramrod that had always puzzled Lex. You could tell a lot about the cut of an owner by the man who represented him to the crew. Humpy Snell was a humpback with a quick and shallow grin. He had a heavy, hooked nose and was just cross-eyed enough that his eyes seemed to hold a strange, creepy light. A-O's crew was the hardest driven in the country, in spite of Osgood's careful piety with his neighbors. With or without Osgood's knowledge, Lex was certain Humpy had had a hand in the nester war.

Lex was still picking at it when he rode over to see Ma Lister, after supper. Ma had been widowed several years before and tried to run a greasy sack spread by herself. She was an enormously heavy woman to whom riding a saddle was nearly impossible. In consequence, her stock scattered high, wide and handsome, with the neighbors shagging it home now and then. Lex had taken to dropping over to Ma's once in a while to see what he could do for her.

When he rode up to her little shack, lost under a stand of big cottonwoods, his heart jumped into his throat. At the hitch bar stood a buckskin he recognized as the saddler Valerie McLain liked to ride, on which he had seen her at a distance a few times. Ma had told him Valerie liked to come over here, the two of them being the only women within miles.

As he rode in he saw the two on the porch. He swung down, left his horse beside Valerie's, and went up the path.

"Howdy, Lex," Ma boomed. "Et?" She was smoking a self-rolled cigarette with obvious contentment. She stared at him as he came up the steps. "Well, who was on the other end of that little beauty treatment?"

Lex got his puffed lips into what passed for a grin, eyeing Valerie covertly. She probably hadn't seen her brother since the fracas, for she was a long way from home. She was dark, tallish, with a trim young body and pair of warm eyes that made his heart hammer every time he saw or remembered her. She had been grateful for his help that night at Broad Oaks, but he had figured a mere cowpoke had no business getting interested in the sister of a rich easterner.

"I run into some of Bruce McLain's new barbed wire," he told Ma. "Miss Valerie, your brother's made himself plumb unpopular in this country with that. Why's he so muleheaded about it?"

"Muleheaded?" Valerie stared at him, her brown eyes flashing in a way that nearly stopped his breath. "He bought the land. Hasn't he got the right to do what he wants with it?"

Ma Lister chuckled. "Being a lady, she can't tell you the reason, Lex. Being anything but, I can. Her brother aims to raise thoroughbred stock. Let some of our scrub range bulls mosey in on him, or let some of his aristocratic heifers stray out, and there goes your blood line. Beef critters just ain't responsible characters when they're on their own."

Lex expected Valerie to blush, but she smiled faintly. "And the only ones Bruce is hurting are those who've been in the habit of trespassing on our property. He wouldn't mind that if he didn't need all the range we've got and didn't have to keep it isolated, the way Ma says."

"Why don't he explain that, then?" Lex asked. "He told me I could take it or leave it."

Valerie made a soft whistling sound with her lips. "You don't know Bruce, and you don't know the highhanded and unreasonable way a few of the cowmen around here have jumped him about it. That kind of attitude just sets Bruce's determination." She smiled. "And I'll bet you had an argument with him over that barbed wire you ran into."

He grinned. "Don't tie a knot in your tally string till you've seen him."

She lifted her head. "The nesters told him about the treatment they had from you cow people. It tickled his fancy to spring a fast deal with them on you. As I suspect it pleases him to pull your whiskers now."

"He's mighty apt to get his own burned off with gunpowder," Lex told her flatly. "This country rises up on its hind legs over anything that cuts up the graze—nesters or barbed wire. It'd welcome him as a cowman if he'd respect our ways. He won't, and he might be sorry for it."

"Just how?"

"For one thing, there were three cowmen in to A-O talking to Anse Osgood about it when I come in from work."

Ma looked up with interest. "What does Anse say about it?"

"He's against making trouble."

"That," said Ma, "is the height of hypocrisy. Anse Osgood wanted that nester land. And I'd bet this greasy-sack spread that Humpy Snell staged some of the incidents that brought on the trouble. You know that as well as I do."

LEX didn't answer. When you rode for a man you gave him your loyalty or you quit him. But what Ma said made

him mighty uncomfortable, rousing that funny feeling he'd had when he talked to Osgood. Her way of putting it simply made more sense than Osgood's explanation.

"That man," Ma resumed, "is a two-faced, cold-blooded snake. Been watching him for years. He ain't got where he is through loving his neighbors, like he pretends. He ain't got Humpy Snell ramrodding his spread for nothing."

That was entirely too close for comfort, and Lex said, "You got anything needs doing, Ma?"

Ma snorted. "I got nothing but things that need doing. Don't dodge me, Lex Whittier. If Anse Osgood sees the chance to start a range war against Bruce McLain he'll do it, egging others on to doing the dirty work so he can sneak in and pick up the pieces dirt cheap."

"Ma," Lex repeated, "you got any work you want done?"

"Not tonight. Valerie was about to start home. She can ride as far as the turn-off with you, and save me from worrying about night catching her." Ma Lister smiled shrewdly. "And for that favor, you can take a look up in the malpais first chance you get. Got a feeling some of my stuff's strayed in there, and it's bad riding country for a woman of my classic proportions."

"I'll do that," Lex told her as he and the girl left the porch.

There was an ache in his throat as he rode through the twilight with Valerie. He kept wondering how she would feel about moving onto a little spread with some plain cowprod. He kept wanting to tell her about his dreams of such a place. He knew he couldn't. The dreams never seemed to get any closer, on a forty-a-month wage. And her background made such an idea ridiculous. So he said nothing, to which she replied in kind, and they rode through a beautiful evening like a pair of strangers.

He left her at the turn-off. He had ridden on a half mile when he saw two horsemen coming down the draw from the upland brakes, barely distinguishable in the deepening night. There wasn't much up there to attract anybody, and when he recognized Anse Osgood and Humpy Snell, Lex obeyed an impulse. He swung his horse off the trail into a stand of alder, swung down and went to his horse's head to keep it quiet.

The oncomers came out on the main trail and halted, the twilight concealing the signs of a rider's having just pulled off the trail.

Lex heard Osgood say, "Well, I'll swing over to McLain's. I got to look like the only one around here who tried to be neighborly. The caper's set, and she's yours from here on, Humpy. And hell can't hide you if you let anything slip."

"Don't worry," Humpy's rasping voice replied. "Way the weather's been, we'll get the kind of night we want in the next day or so. You leave it to me, Anse. I handled them nesters to suit you, didn't I?"

The two separated, and Lex stood by his horse for a long while with the flesh on his back pulled into a disturbing tension. There was no use trying to fool himself any longer. He was right, Ma Lister was doubly right, and something as bad or worse than the nester war was fast coming to a boil. He was curious about their business up in the brakes, but it was too dark to be poking in those tangled canyons and abrupt jump-offs. He recalled what Ma had said about figuring she had some strays in there. He mounted and started thoughtfully for headquarters.

CHAPTER TWO

They Strike at Night

THE next day turned out hotter than ever, with the humidity gluing a man's shirt to his back. By mid-afternoon the air seemed congealed, with black thunderheads beginning to move up from the southeast. Between round-ups, riding on A-O was light. But now the outfit tensed. This was weather that bred electric storms. If one came there would be hard riding to keep the herd somewhere within fifty miles of its rightful graze.

It was this condition that began to stir the worries in Lex again. And it was when he saw Humpy Snell come out of the office just before sundown, mount his horse hurriedly and ride off, that Lex began to bite his nails. One of these nights

we'll get the weather we want, Humpy had said in effect. Upon emerging from the malpais, a few moments later, when Osgood came out and rode off in the direction Humpy had taken, Lex knew he had some investigating to do.

He waited a while before he thought it wise to saddle a horse for himself. Then he rode off toward Ma Lister's, as if it were no more than one of his usual trips. He was not surprised, however, when he picked up the tracks of Osgood and Humpy a little later, for he had suspected they would ride a half circle and strike out in the direction they had been returning from the night before. But he could see nothing of the pair, and it was getting darker by the moment.

He was in nowise surprised when the sign he followed turned off up the draw that made a sharp trough down from the bench. He halted a moment, considering the foolishness of trying to follow them through that maze of broken country, perhaps riding into unexpected trouble. In another half hour it would be full dark. He was on the point of going on, anyhow, when he heard a horse coming down the regular trail. He waited.

He straightened in the saddle when he saw it was Valerie McLain.

She called pleasantly from the distance, "Is that you, Lex? I was hoping I'd catch you on your way up to Ma Lister's. She worried me with what she said about a plot against Bruce. I told him and he only laughed at me. Incidentally, when I got a look at him I took the knot out of my tally string. You boys did a job on each other—like a couple of hoodlums."

"Got word for Ma?" Lex asked. Pleased as he was to see her, he wished it hadn't been just now. He flung an anxious glance up the draw, which she noticed.

"Were you going to hunt up the steers she thought were up there?" Valerie asked.

"Started out, but it's too dark," Lex said. "And you oughtn't to be riding around as free as you do, Miss Valerie. This country's none too civilized yet."

"I can take care of myself," Valerie said with a toss of the head, making him think of her brother's quick acceptance of any challenge. "Moreover, I was about to invite myself up on the bench with you. I'd like to see the moon rise from up there."

"Come along," he said quickly, making his own decision then. It would do no harm to poke in a ways, up there, to see what they could see. Providing they didn't let themselves run into Osgood and Humpy, which might have unfortunate consequences.

Night was running in rapidly. Even if she expected to enjoy a moonrise, Lex knew that he wouldn't. His feeling of tension mounted as they climbed the notch onto the bench. It was a slowly descending tableland, sometimes towering above and again falling below the ruptured terrain of the badlands beyond.

He said, "We can make a long swing down the bench and come out at the draw where your brother and I exchanged courtesies. That'd put you closer to home than the other way."

"Let's," Valerie said, and she seemed pleased at the prospects of the ride with him.

It was half an hour later when lightning flashed abruptly across the sky, followed by a close, sharp clap of thunder. The girl let out an involuntary cry, both horses skittering. Lex reached and grabbed the cheek-strap of the buckskin, holding it down.

"We'll swing around and go back the other way," he said.

"Let's," Valerie answered, now as eager to leave as she had been to come. Again the black sky seemed to part, lightning slashing above them, the thunder clap immediate and ringing. The jar of the disturbed air reached them, and the horses now were hard to hold in.

IT WAS ten minutes later that Lex pulled in his mount, halting Valerie and listening in close attention. Except for an occasional cloud-masked flash off to the left, there was no more lightning. But now Lex heard the beat of running hoofs on the dry earth. Coming toward them. It was a heavier beat than two horses would make. They were steers, moving fast, and a sizable bunch of them.

He extracted the meaning in driving thought. "Quick, we've got to hide ourselves in those rocks yonder."

"Rustlers?" Valerie asked.

He had no intention of saying who he thought it was, not while he was still on Anse Osgood's payroll. "Mebbe. And it'd be right ticklish getting caught up here by them." He cursed himself for having brought her up, a romantic idiot with his judgment dulled at the prospect of a moonlight ride with a girl. He swung right, and she followed, toward a rock outcrop a hundred yards ahead.

He had tied his own hands, for if he showed himself to the ones he suspected to be driving that bunch he would be apt to draw fireworks. Neither Osgood nor Humpy would care to get caught at this kind of caper. Lex led Valerie in among the rocks and they swung down. "Press your hand on your horse's nose," he told her. "Or he'll nicker when their horses come up."

The sky kept quiet, and the drumming hoofs grew louder. It was only a matter of minutes until the bunch—twenty or thirty head, Lex judged—became visible in the night. Moving down the slow slant of the long bench at a fast, driven trot. Behind, two riders rode, keeping the pressure on their drag. Their features were undistinguishable in the night, and Lex was glad of this. He didn't want Valerie identifying them, and doubted that she could, being a relative stranger in the country.

The bunch swept quickly past. Roughly Lex said, "Wait here. Whatever you do, don't stray out of hiding. I'm going to follow them and see if I can dope out the caper."

"Oh, Lex. That's too dangerous."

"They're Ma Lister's steers. The ones she figured had strayed in here. It's my notion they were driven in. She can't afford to lose 'em." He mounted and rode off before she could protest again.

He rode up as close as he figured safe, then kept that gait, relying on the noise of the moving bunch to cover his horse's minor racket. He was picturing the country ahead, trying to figure out the meaning of this movement. Then it came to him in a sickening flash, almost as if the sky had again been rent by lightning.

They were doing the very thing he had in mind when he proposed the ride to Valerie, following the bench, meaning to come down at the draw Bruce McLain had fenced with barbed wire. They meant to run this little bunch of Ma Lister's steers down that draw. Into that fence. It would leave a sickening, lacerated pileup of bovine flesh. Somebody would find it, lay it to a natural stampede resulting from the electrical disturbance. Ma Lister was popular and poor. It would explode the countryside, and Bruce McLain would be the target of its wrath.

No thinking of Valerie's safety now. He had to stop this thing if he could. He spurred his horse, bending forward in the saddle. The ground was falling away faster, and he pulled close enough to see the moving bunch ahead in the night. There was only one rider in the rear now. He knew the other had swung ahead to turn them down the draw. It was close now, too close.

LEX drew his gun and fired a shot in the air, hoping it would scare the riders into lighting out, leaving the bunch to run itself down on the bench. Maybe they thought it was thunder, for it seemed to have no effect. He lashed his horse and fired twice more. A rosy red bloomed in the night down there; he heard the punching crack of a gun. He checked his horse's gait, not foolish enough to pound stubbornly into the face of gunfire.

A series of shots erupted ahead. He saw the bunch veer to the right, then the shape of a rider beyond. That shooting had been to turn them into the draw and the uncheckable run to a pileup at the bottom. The other rider fired again and then again, straight at Lex, forcing him to pull down his horse still more. The rushing bunch disappeared into the head of the draw. The two horsemen sent their mounts plunging on along the bench, away from Lex. He cursed bitterly. The dirty work was done, and there was no point in chasing them.

He didn't investigate the draw, for it would do no good and only be a sickening experience. He had seen such pileups before, a sight to turn the strongest stomach. He rode back, slowly and thoughtfully, to the scab rock where he had left Valerie.

He realized the plight he had let himself be caught in. Valerie could swear to no more than that she had seen two riders

chousing a bunch of steers along the bench, this night. Even if she were suspicious she couldn't say with certainty who they were. Nor could Lex Whittier, as far as their actual features were concerned. Yet he knew what he knew, or suspected, so strongly that it was as good as the truth. He might possibly be able to shove Anse Osgood's range war down the man's throat.

It gave him a feeling of disloyalty even so, for he was an A-O puncher. The cow-country might be persuaded by his story, but would hold an eternal grudge against him for siding the unpopular greenhorn at the cost of disloyalty to his boss. The range was like that.

And there was another, deeper worry. Had they recognized him, or made a shrewd guess as to who had tried to stop them? He recalled the thin-veiled mockery he had made of Osgood's carefully advertised self-righteousness, in the office the day before. Osgood would recall that and put two and two together. He wouldn't want any man, other than his tool Humpy, knowing about this night's work and living with that knowledge in his mind. Lex Whittier felt cold, in spite of the sultry night.

Valerie was where he had left her, and she called anxiously. "What was the shooting?"

"Tried to throw a scare into 'em," Lex said, keeping his voice as light as possible. "They lit out. On down the bench. We get rustlers in here ever once in a while. I reckon Ma Lister's going to be shy a big part of her steers. That'll hit her pretty hard."

"Are you sure they're hers?" Valerie McLain asked.

Lex wished he hadn't said that. He hadn't been able to see the brands, and was sure as to their ownership only because it fitted so well into the overall scheme he had reconstructed in his mind. That didn't matter. Anybody's cattle piled up on Bruce McLain's barbed wire would bring the same results. The war Osgood and Snell so badly wanted.

Idly, he said, "Only figured so because she had a notion she had some strays in here." The lightning cut loose in earnest, then, and they quickly started their horses for home.

CHAPTER THREE

Light a Shuck—to Boothill!

LEX wakened the next morning with a feeling of sick apprehension. He knew it lay strictly on his own shoulders. There could be an outbreak of violence between McLain's new outfit and the established ranchers. Or maybe there needn't be one—if Whittier had the guts to speak his piece. His strong loyalty to his spread was in no way unique; any rider worth his salt would fight for his outfit or have the sense to quit it before the big pinch came. He didn't like barbed wire; he hated to see the range cut to pieces. Yet he remembered the cruelly used little bunch of steers, the revolting underhanded work he knew to be going on in the guise of piety.

He had no question about Anse Osgood's intentions. The man aimed to see Bruce McLain scared out or even killed. He wanted to buy that piece of grass cheap, as Lex knew he had intended after he'd got the nesters discouraged enough to quit. Maybe there was a trace of revenge against McLain in this caper, as well. Lex knew his duty was plain and accepted it, his reluctance coming only from the disloyalty it required to his ranch and to his community.

He was only half dressed, among half a dozen other sleepy-eyed punchers, when Humpy Snell stumped into the bunkhouse.

"Anse wants to see you over in the big house, Lex," Humpy said. He hauled around and went out.

Lex saw that his knees were shaking when he pulled on his boots. But his mind was made up. He took time to wash his face at the watering trough, then combed his hair. He made a cigarette and lighted it. He took his gun belt off the peg and buckled it on, arousing no curiosity since that was usual with a man expecting to be sent on some special chore.

He knew they wanted him at the big house instead of the office to be sure there were no eavesdroppers, for Anse and Humpy occupied the big structure alone. They were both there, in the dusty, littered living room.

Lex walked in calmly and said, "Before you say a word, Anse, let me tell you

I've quit A.O. Quit it last night."

Osgood exchanged a thoughtful glance with Humpy, then stared at Lex. "Can't make you out, Whittier. You tied into McLain for fencing off that draw, the other day. Yet you spied on us last night. You running some kind of sandy of your own?"

"I've got an ordinary man's interest in decency," Lex said. "And I got his dislike of two-faced neighborliness. You never rung true to me, Osgood. Don't know why I stayed on your payroll so long."

Osgood rounded his eyes in mock surprise. "Thought you wanted to save up for a start of your own, Lex. Look. McLain has got more land than I need. If I can get it cheap, I see no reason why you shouldn't have your own start over there. I might even stake you to the stockers."

"Osgood, I'd as soon leave here without having to beat the devil outta you."

Humpy pulled himself straight and gave Lex a hard stare. "Leave me handle this, Anse. It's the way I said. He's smitten on that girl. Heard in town how he tied into a bunch of trailers over her. Moonstruck, that's all."

"Might be bright for you to leave her out of the conversation, Humpy," Lex said.

"She's coming in. Don't exactly like it, but there's no other way. You're right, Whittier. You've quit. And you're pulling out right now. You ain't saying a word about what you seen on the bench, and you ain't ever coming back."

"Usually make my own plans, Humpy."

"This time you'll think twice. Something awful could happen to that girl, the way she runs around day and night. Something awful's damned apt to happen if you don't do what I'm telling you. Roll your blankets and light your shuck. Don't try warning her and her brother. Just git."

It was like getting kicked in the stomach. Lex stared at Humpy Snell, without the slightest question as to the man's earnestness. There was something deep in Humpy's brain that always reflected in those eyes. Something that sanded a man's spine. It was there now. And Osgood, by his silence, endorsed the threat.

Lex's angry impulse to defy them died in his throat. He thought, Lord, how can I help myself? They're set on it. They'd do anything to pull it off. Even to keep from getting showed up. A threat to kill him, instead, wouldn't have disturbed him half as much. He felt his palms turning wet and his throat dry.

THEN a thought broke through to the conscious part of his mind, filling him with alarm. Valerie'll tell Bruce somebody ran them steers down the draw. When the squabble starts, they'll call on me to verify it. If I'm still around. Yet he took another look at the triumphant leer on Humpy's face, at the calm piety on Osgood's, and rebellion broke out in him. Valerie McLain would scorn him like dust under her feet if he let fear for her check his concern for common decency.

He said, "You shypokes can bear this in mind. If you harm a hair of that girl's head, I'll gutshoot you both."

Humpy let out a long, slow breath. "So you aim to play the fool."

"I aim to have the say about what I do." Lex eyed them steadily as he backed to the door and went through.

He knew they would kill him now if they could find a safe way to do it. He didn't mind that if it would save Valerie. He was far from assured that his counter-threat would protect her. But the pair was playing a waiting game now. Somebody else had to discover the piled-up steers in the draw. Somebody else had to get the word around and inflame tempers to the point of explosion. That could happen at any hour, or it might take days.

He got his soogans at the bunkhouse, pitching his few belongings onto his blankets before he rolled them. He had a small check coming but was more interested in getting away from here than facing those two again to collect it. He had always ridden an A-O string and was wondering where he was going to hoof it to when he slung the roll over a shoulder and stepped out. The other riders were at breakfast and he was hungry, but he wasn't going to take time for that, either.

Humpy Snell stood out front, pressed against the bunkhouse wall so that Lex had not seen him. He had his gun in his hand, held low and lined on the big puncher's middle.

He said, "Whittier, we changed our minds about running you off. That won't happen till after the fracas. Till then you're going to live in the big house with Anse and me. Locked in one of the empty rooms. But we're carrying you as quit on the books, and the boys'll be told you already lit out."

Lex sucked in a long breath. Humpy was smart enough to stand well away. If he had to shoot, he would, and make up some plausible excuse for it afterward. Lex thought, Anyway it'll take their minds off Valerie. That's something . . . He stiffened suddenly, as did Humpy. Riders were pounding across the flat, cut off by the barns, unseen but plainly heard. Coming in.

Humpy scowled. "You step back into the bunkhouse, Whittier, till we see what this is." He grinned. "First, hand me your gun." The glittering, swirling light came out in his eyes. It was enough to make Lex obey.

Humpy pulled the door shut, and Lex stood staring at its inner side while the riders pounded into the compound. He heard Humpy's mild voice say, "Well, howdy there, McLain—an' Miss McLain—" A rough impatience took him and he flung the door open and stepped out.

Humpy scowled but didn't dare shoot him down now. Lex saw Bruce and Valerie McLain. Humpy made a slight shrug as if dismissing Lex for the moment and stared at the newcomers with a thoughtful frown.

"Where's Osgood?" McLain demanded. His face was set, his eyes flinty and his voice hard.

"Coming," Humpy said, and pointed.

ANSE OSGOOD came across the porch and stepped into the yard. He had put a welcoming smile on his mouth, and he touched his hat in deference to Valerie as he came up.

Bruce McLain stared at the sling over Lex's shoulder, at his empty holster, and the extra gun Humpy Snell had shoved under the waistband of his trousers. McLain made no comment but the big puncher knew he sensed the deadly strain he had broken in on.

"Howdy, neighbors," Osgood said. "Light down and have some breakfast with us."

"Osgood," McLain said curtly, "I knew night before last, when you paid me a neighborly social call, that you are a snake in the grass. We just came down from the draw. We saw the mess there. But I've pulled your fangs. I've sent a man after Kirk Winkly, the fire-eater you expect to goad into leading an attack on me. We're going to have it out right here."

"What mess?" Osgood asked innocently, but his mouth stayed open.

"Let's not go through that innocent rigamarole," McLain snapped. "I knew what you are even before I moved in here. Those nesters told me they were sure you instigated the feeling against them. And that Humpy Snell pulled the dirty tricks the nesters got blamed for. That's why they jumped at the chance to sell to me, when my agent happened to approach them. But they warned me."

"Why, what a lot of ridiculous—"

"If everything's as pious around here as you make out," McLain said coldly, "tell your man Humpy to give Whittier back his gun."

"Why, Whittier got ringy over a lacing down for back-sass and—"

"Give him back his gun."

Osgood scowled, nodded, and Humpy handed the weapon to Lex. Lex accepted and holstered it in relief, knowing he was going to leave here with the McLain's party if he could. The A-O crew was beginning to emerge from the cookhouse now, but they passed on with indifference and headed for the corrals to saddle up and await day orders from Humpy. But the ramrod stayed where he was, curious and worried and set for trouble.

"How come you sent for Winkly?" Humpy asked.

"Because I want him to know those steers didn't stampede into my barbed wire. They were driven down that draw, from the bench, by two men. One of them was hunchbacked."

Even Osgood opened his mouth at that. Both stared at Lex. The big puncher knew they were guessing that he had gone over to McLain's place with the story, the night before, beating them to the punch. Lex was willing to let it go at that, and

realized why McLain had concealed the source of his information. He didn't want to disclose that Valerie had been on the bench with a man the night before.

"And because," McLain resumed, "I want to make it clear to Winkly what a fool he played in the nester war."

"Who was it seen a hunchback up there?" Humpy asked. "Is he ready to swear to it?" He darted a quick glance to Lex, and it was plain who he thought the informer to be. Since then Humpy had made some potent threats. Lex saw what was coming. Humpy was going to force him to change his story, to deny it, which would leave McLain in a hole.

McLain frowned, shrugged and said nothing. Lex's respect for the man went higher. McLain wasn't going to involve Lex; he had based his action on what Valerie had told him. Which meant she made note of Humpy's twisted shape in the saddle, the night before, and made her own guesses, in spite of what Lex had told her. These were capable people, fit to travel with. Lex made up his mind fast.

"He sure is, Humpy," Lex said.

THE light was in Humpy's eyes. He stood thoughtfully and, without warning, went into incredibly swift motion. His gun swept into his hand.

"Humpy, you fool!" Osgood said.

Humpy's lips peeled back in a cold grin. "Just thinking faster than you, Anse. Stay put, you jiggers. I'll plug the first man to move a hand, and the girl to boot."

A wild alarm had spread over Osgood's face, and he stared at his ramrod.

"McLain is right," Humpy resumed. "Kirk Winkly's no fool. Once a man's attention's called to it, he can find plenty sign on the bench to prove Ma's steers was choused into that pile-up. It's backfired on us, Anse."

"Shut up, you fool!"

"What's the difference? Winkly's going to believe Whittier. And what McLain'll throw in. He's going to organize a war, all right. With half a dozen cowmen you used to try and pull your nester caper on. Only he'll bring his war his way. Me, I don't fancy that."

The last pretense left Anse Osgood as Humpy's cold logic sank in. The pious face he had been trying to wear slacked, the reposed features showing a cruel and worried man.

He made an assenting motion with his hand. "Go ahead, Humpy."

"Kirk Winkly just ain't ever going to hear their argument," Humpy snapped. "Get Whittier's gun again, Anse. Then McLain's."

Bruce McLain's voice was explosive. "You cold-blooded devils! Are you talking about murder?"

"There's going to be a gun fight," Humpy replied in his flat, level voice. "When the boys get here from the corral, you three'll be dead. Because you rode in here and started it, over a lie to shift the blame for that pile-up off your plagued barb wire. And got the worst of it."

Lex had listened to this in mounting horror. It was incredible, yet it confronted them. He saw it in Humpy's wicked, gleaming eyes; its confirmation lurked in Osgood's. The man came forward to get his gun.

Lex aimed to make it a genuine fight, but Bruce McLain got that idea first. It was clumsy, hopeless, but McLain tried desperately to get his revolver free of its holster. Humpy's gun spat flame. McLain stiffened in the saddle and fell slowly on the far side of the horse. Valerie screamed, but Lex was in motion.

He fired just as Humpy swung his gun, saw the man's knees buckle as he clapped a hand to his chest, gun hand relaxing its fingers. Humpy fell, but Osgood's gun was out and lined. The man had a second's advantage. His gun roared. Lex shot, staggered forward, knowing he was hit in the shoulder. Valerie had swung down from her horse and caught up McLain's gun. But it wasn't needed. Humpy and Osgood were down, motionless.

Lex caved in, managing to land in a sit on the bunkhouse steps. He was able to keep his senses, and hold the gun steady in his hand. He was aware now of shouting in the lower compound, the racket of running men. Two or three were cronies of Humpy's, a couple more had always toadied to him. The other half were decent men, but Lex didn't know how they would react to a cowpuncher's turning on his bosses to side a greenhorn.

He had climbed to his feet when the first pair came around the corner. He

covered them and the rest as they rushed up. "Just take it easy," he said. "Vince, Frank, your sidekick's dead. Think twice before you try to take it up for him. The rest of you wait till you get the lowdown." He explained it then and saw his friends emerge by the expressions on their faces. It was enough to subdue the others.

Lex walked over to where Bruce McLain lay, with Valerie now beside him, her face anguished. Somebody had rolled McLain onto his back, but his shirt front was covered with blood. Yet the chest still rose and fell. "Somebody get for the doctor," Lex gasped, then the ground began to whirl and he collapsed.

IT WAS three days later when, with Valerie, Lex walked into Bruce McLain's bedroom. The man was conscious, and the doctor had said he had every chance of being on his feet again within a month. He was pale, but he grinned.

"Fellow," McLain said, "we don't get anywhere fighting each other, but we make a team when we go in together."

Lex returned the grin. "Wanted to tell you that was nervy. You knew you never had a chance. But you did it anyhow to give me my chance at Humpy and Osgood. Barbed wire or no barbed wire, you'll make a cowman."

"Who're you going to work for when that shoulder gets well?" McLain asked.

Lex shrugged and wished he hadn't, for the shoulder was still pretty lame. "Osgood didn't have any heirs. Sheriff's going to be running A-O till the thing's settled. He's going to replace Ma's steers out of A-O stock. Reckon I can stay on."

"How'd you like to ramrod my outfit for me?" McLain gave Valerie a roguish look, then stared at the ceiling. "Possibly becoming a partner in time."

"You mean that?"

"Why not? But you'll earn every cent you make out of it. I'll see to that. And you'll be worth it to me. I need a man with cow savvy, as you call it. It embarrasses me trying to boss punchers who know more than I do."

"In that case," Lex said, "It's a deal."

He was walking on air when he went out with Valerie. She came as far as the porch. He was tongue-tied, as he had always been with her, but with prospects of more than a lifetime at forty-a-month-and-found the thing looked fine.

She seemed willing to help him out. "How soon will you report for work, Lex? I'm having a harder time than he does, trying to run things."

"Why," Lex said, "as soon as I can fetch over my soogans."

She smiled softly. "I guess I can wait that long."

THE END

When he sided a dude against the range Goliath's horde, it was—

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DEAD MEN AIN'T NO JOKE!

By KENNETH FOWLER

Johnny Warfield aimed to be a marshal, so he started on the sweating-end of a shovel, to learn his hard-won lesson, written with the smoking-end of a Colt.

THE drummer said "Now you take that fellow there," and nodded towards the lanky, easy-gaited figure in the white Stetson who was sauntering past the hotel's gallery. "Looks more like some Eastern dude than a frontier gun marshal." He added, with a trace of smugness, "But we're gradually getting you fellows tamed down out here. That white hat shows you what's coming. Another five, ten years and it'll be a uniform with brass buttons. Good-by to your wild and woolly West then . . . Have a cigar?"

The old-timer accepted the cigar, chewed off the end and impassively spat the remnant over the gallery railing.

His pale, nerveless blue eyes swiveled leisurely and gave the man seated beside him a frosty scrutiny.

"That there dude, which you call him, is Johnny Warfield," he said.

The drummer's face remained blank. "Warfield? That don't seem to ring any bell with me, Pop."

The old-timer lighted the cigar, his steady glance gauging the attention of the

Johnny had his left hand inside the hat, and was raising it slowly over the crown of the walk

drummer over the flame of the match.

"This goes back about five years," he said. . . .

* * *

Johnny Warfield looked just like a big, overgrown kid in those days, eighteen, nineteen maybe, and there wasn't a rancher anywhere within twenty mile of here who'd give him bunkhouse space, if he needed a steady hand. No-account fiddlefoot, most of the cattlemen around these parts called him. Tom Peters, the Apache Wells marshal, had another name for him: saddle bum.

Johnny wasn't much shakes with a snuffy bronc or at throwing a hooley-ann, and his heart just wasn't in cow-wrangling anyway. He'd hire out his saddle at some cow spread for a month or two, and that would be his limit. Johnny hankered to be a law-wrangler, and he never stopped off at the Wells he didn't go straight to Tom Peters to pester him for a deputy's job.

Lot of folks get taken down with the complaint Johnny had—ambition. Maybe they're good bronc-peelers or store clerks or biscuit-rollers, but they get the itch to be something else, and then there's usually hell to pay. You take that kind, and more often than not they're a gristle-heeled lot—stubborn as a barnful of Missouri mules, even when they haven't got the brains to pound sand in a gopher hole. That's the way Apache Wells folks had Johnny tabbed, and they couldn't have figured any farther from the mark. But it sure looked like they'd got their tally straight, especially when Johnny caught the daunsy over Tom Peters' black-haired daughter, Sally May, and threw another chunk of fat on the fire. That really started the whole business.

Tom didn't give the kid the rush act right away. Kind of a mushy-hearted old fool, Tom. And Johnny was so plumb serious about this deputy business, he calculated to wean him away from the notion by degrees, not to hurt him. It took Tom almost three weeks to realize that honey wasn't the right medicine for Johnny Warfield. And that's when he began trying him on a rough-and-tumble vinegar diet.

JOHNNY'D been camping on the Peters' doorstep close to a month, dividing his time between bracing Tom for a deputy's star and keeping Sally May's davenport warm, when the marshal decided it was time to put a stop to the siege. He told Johnny there was a night swamper's job waiting for him over at Bill Deerman's livery, and that with opportunities in the law enforcement business not too bright, he'd better take it.

"Now you sashay over there and tell Deerman I sent you," Tom told Johnny. "You take this in the right spirit, and it might lead to something."

"Something, sure," Johnny said darkly. "A long-handled shovel."

"Well, what's wrong with a shovel?"

"What's wrong with a badge?" Johnny countered.

"Dag-nag it, we've been into all that before! You can't expect to be a deputy marshal without any experience."

"I suppose I'll pick it up at the stable," Johnny said. "Experience, I mean."

"I don't give a hoot in hell what you pick up at the stable!" roared Tom Peters violently. "Now get out of this office! I'm busy. And don't come back here without that job."

"Mr. Peters?" Johnny said.

"Now, no more arguments about this, Johnny. Either you start with Deerman and quit this lazyin' around, or you stop seeing Sally May. That's final."

"I'll take a lick at the job. It ain't that," Johnny said, and that's when Tom noticed the funny way the kid was staring up at his hat. Tom Peters wasn't a dude-style dresser, but he had a weakness for fancy hats and when he was on duty always wore a big white Stetson, trimmed around the band with bright silver conchas. Maybe Tom figured his badge wasn't enough, and that he needed the hat as a little extry emblem of his authority. Whichever, there wasn't another one like it anywhere in the county, and anybody ever needed Tom in a hurry, all they had to do was start cutting sign for that hat.

"Something on your mind, get it off," Tom snapped, annoyed by the kid's dumb staring.

"It's—it's that hat," blurted Johnny awkwardly. "I just wondered if you knew anyplace where I could get one.

"Hell's fire, what's the matter with the hat you got on?"

Johnny flushed. "This hat ain't different from any other hat. And if I get to be a deputy marshal—" Tom's eyes started to frost, but Johnny plowed right on with it— "well, I figure a law officer oughta have a rig folks could tell him by, like—like yours."

Tom like to have bust his surcingle, at that. Then it flashed on him that he was a victim of hero worship. And Johnny'd put him on such a high pedestal he even honed to copy his hat and rigging!

On an impulse, Tom Peters told a white lie. "Son," he said gently, "you couldn't buy *this* hat for love nor money. This here's the hat Wyatt Earp wore the time of his fight with the Clantons, at the O.K. Corral. The color don't mean a thing. Happened to be palaverin' with Wyatt one day, admirin' it, and he just plumb yanked 'er off and give it to me. I just wear it out of sentiment, like."

Tom had calculated that would tie off the kid's hankering for a white hat; it only took a second for him to see his windy had just made matters worse.

"Jeekers!" Johnny breathed, reverent like, and a kind of uneasy feeling rippled up Tom's spine at the kid's awed look. "That was the day Wyatt used his Buntline Special," Johnny murmured dreamily. "Him and his two brothers and Doc Holliday fired seventeen shots, all hits exceptin' four Doc smashed through a window after Ike Clanton." His gray eyes had a soft, far-away look, swinging back to Tom. "Too bad one of Ike's bullets didn't ventilate that hat, ain't it, Mr. Peters. You know, to make it more sentimental like."

"Sentimental like!" Tom jerked up out of his chair. "You're loco!" he roared. "Loco as a stump-tailed bull in fly time! Now get out of here before I lose my temper! Go on, vamose! And you come back here without that job, *I'll* ventilate a hat for you. I'll ventilate it so damn' full of holes you'll have to wear mosquito nettin' over it!"

Johnny took the job with Bill Deerman, and held it—for almost a week. Then one night Tom came home and found him hunkered on the front porch with Sally May.

Cute little trick, Sally May was, with kind of dancy green eyes, a swatch of curly black hair and a sassy little stuck-up nose with just a smidgin of freckles dusted across the bridge of it. Her hands were folded in her lap as Tom Peters turned in from the street and started posting up the path to the house, and her eyes tilted up at Johnny Warfield looked warm as a cuddled kitten's.

". . . . The second Bat went down," Johnny was busily orating to Sally May, "Ben Thompson sprang across the faro layout, drawing his six-shooter. 'Stand back!" he commanded the gang of Texans crowding in to finish Bat off. 'Bat Masterson is my friend. I'll down the first man who lays a hand on him.' For a second, nobody moved. Then—"

A grim voice interrupted: "Then the party broke up—plumb sudden," and Tom Peters walked up and stood scowling down at Johnny.

"What happened at Deerman's, Johnny?" Tom demanded flatly. "You been fired, I suppose."

"Why—why not exactly fired," stammered Johnny. "That is—well, Bill and me agreed I ought to take a little more time and look around for something more in my—"

Tom's frosty blue eyes withered him with a look. Then he heeled around and spoke curtly to Sally May.

"Sally May," he ordered, "you march in the house and lock your door and stuff some cotton in your ears—pronto!"

Then he began on Johnny.

THE old-timer paused to relight his cigar, his glance slanting quizzically at the drummer over the cupped flame of the match.

"And what," grinned the drummer, "did Sally May do?"

"Tom Peters couldn't have dragged her off that damn' porch with a twenty-mule team."

"I like a girl with plenty of pepper. What happened then?"

The old-timer waved out his match, tossed it idly over the gallery railing, and sucked on the lacerated stogie till it smoldered again. "I'm coming to that," he said. . . .

Well, sir, Sally May could be just as

ornery as her old man when she got her dander up, and she sure had it up a-plenty that night. Her and Tom got so dad-burned excited lacing it into each other they plumb forgot about Johnny. And Johnny, he just stood there like all this was a private feudin' between Tom and Sally May, his eyes sort of mooney and vacant, staring up at Tom's big white Stetson.

After about a minute he picked up his own droopy old headpiece and let out a sigh. "Well, reckon I'll be moseyin' along, Sally May," he said and started ambling off.

At that, Sally May let out a yell and came bouncing off the porch after him. "Johnny, wait for me! Wait for me, you big crazy galoot!"

Well, the upshot was that Sally May and Tom busted up. Sally took a room at Miz' Empringham's boarding house and got a job at the Bon Ton Millinery. After that, things quieted down for a spell, Sally May selling hats at the Bon Ton, Johnny haunting the post office to study the current reward dodgers, and Tom, after his blood pressure had got down to about halfway to normal, mooning around like a sun-struck dogie and trying to act noble and indifferent.

Johnny had a little stake left from his last cowpunching job, and when he wasn't hanging around the Bon Ton, making sheep's eyes at Sally May, he just perambulated around town looking stern and steely-eyed, like he was out hunting man-killers.

Had a plumb single-track mind, that Johnny. He was a regular walking encyclopedia of the records of any sheriff, marshal or badman you'd want to name, and his little room up over Barney's feed store was cluttered with the darndest bunch of junk you ever laid eyes on—horse pistols and sawed-off shotguns and copies of old reward dodgers, and even a hank of curly blond hair he claimed had been clipped off the famous tresses of Wild Bill Hickock.

Sounds crazy as popcorn on a hot stove, don't it, mister? Well, that's how it struck folks in Apache Wells, and they hoorawed the kid from hell to breakfast.

There seemed to be some question who first started the josh of calling Johnny "Sheriff," but you probably wouldn't be far off the mark if you gave the honor to Al Cluff, who runs the Silver Spur saloon and dancehall, right across the street there. Cluff got the brilliant notion of setting up Johnny for a real hooraw, and it was pretty easy once Cluff began noticing how Johnny used to stand backed up against his bar of an evening, with his thumbs hooked down under his gun belt and his eyes running over the crowd like he was watching for the Dalton boys to show up and try and start something. One night Al button-holed him there.

"Evenin', Sheriff," Al said.

That sheriff business had backfired on Al, right from the start. Johnny didn't mind being called sheriff. He liked it.

"Hullo, Al," Johnny said agreeably. "Good crowd tonight. Right orderly," he added, a tinge of regret entering his voice.

"Appears to be," Al said mysteriously, and dropping his voice to a stage whisper, nodded across the room to the alcove where his faro layouts were located. "Johnny," Al said, "I'd admire to have you kind of keep an eye on that game over there in that corner, tonight. That tall gent with the black sideburns and low-slung guns is Wild Dan Blackaby."

JOHNNY pointed around like a bronc sniffing a bait of oats. Wild Dan Blackaby was the brother of Shep Blackaby, a killer Marshal Peters had sent up to Yuma a year ago for a long and well-earned retirement. At the trial, Wild Dan had sworn publicly he would get Tom Peters, and at the time it had made quite a furore. But nothing had happened, the talk had quieted down, and since starting his courtship of Sally May, even Johnny had almost forgotten the incident.

Now he swung his glance from the dark-haired hombre at the faro table back to Al Cluff. "You sure about that?" he asked Al. "I took in the trial of Shep Blackaby, and the way I remember it, both the Blackaby boys was blond-headed."

Al Cluff looked wise. "Ever hear of hair dye, Johnny? Wild Dan wouldn't want to advertise himself—not here in Tom Peters' home grounds."

"Why don't you hunt up Tom then?" Johnny suggested sensibly. "Or if you

like, I'll hunt him up and you can—"

"Tom's out of town," interrupted Cluff tensely. "Called up to the Ringbolts on some kind of a ruckus. You'll have to pinch-hit for him, Johnny, anything happens. Tom's been sort of grooming you for his deputy, I understand."

Johnny's mouth pinched a frown over his pleased smile. "Well, he wasn't exactly grooming me for *that*," Johnny said.

"You must be mistaken," Cluff said. "Tom told me himself he thought you'd make a first-class deputy, soon as he had a chance to season you up a bit." He reached out and squeezed Johnny's arm. "Just keep me posted, Johnny. I'll be in my office," he said, and then before Johnny could get his voice up level with his tonsils, Cluff was weaving away through the crowd, towards the back of the saloon.

Well, of course, you can savvy what happened next. In just about two minutes the big, red-faced hombre across from Blackaby let out an angry yell, "By Judas, you can't brace me, mister!" and then Blackaby was pushing out from the table, tearing back at his coattails.

Johnny didn't notice that the drinking crowd were all faced out from the bar, watching him in a funny, stiff-faced way, behind the backs of their hands. You see, mister, it happened so sudden Johnny didn't notice anything but that big Peacemaker looping up from the holster of this so-called Blackaby gent, and for about the time it takes to shave a cat's whisker, the sight plumb paralyzed him. And at that moment Blackaby shaded the red-faced man to the draw, and his six-shooter roared.

The slow-draw actor, Andy Graw, made a right good death scene of it, and Wild Dan laid it on thick, too. Soon as Andy had sawdust in his whiskers, the killer stepped out from the table and gave the body a kind of careless kick with his boot, like he just wanted to be sure he wouldn't have to waste any more lead on it. And then Johnny Warfield jerked out of his trance.

He catted up behind Blackaby and yanked out his Colt. "Drop that gun, Blackaby," he ordered flatly, "or I'll drill you."

The man with the black sideburns spun around, and the second he saw Johnny, he seemed to go all to pieces in a hurry.

"The sheriff!" he gasped, and then Al Cluff, back at the bar, couldn't hold it any more and let out a regular old hell-buster of a guffaw. That set it off.

"Three cheers for Johnny-come-lately!" somebody yelled, and as Johnny swung around, the laughter came roaring at him from all sides of the room.

For maybe half a minute, Johnny stood tracked there in the center of the floor, staring down that crazy mob with a look of cool, man-sobering contempt.

Then when he had them quiet, Johnny Warfield spoke. "Maybe this josh is on me, gents, and maybe it ain't," Johnny said. "I reckon it's all accordin' to the way you want to look at it. Here's how I do: Suppose it had been the real thing? Would you be laughin' then—or would you be forted up back of the bar, waitin' for the smoke to lift?"

He swung on his heel with that, and mister, you never heard quiet come to a place any quicker than it came right then to that barroom. That's the way it is, sometimes, with a bunch of tough rawhiders in this neck of the woods. Johnny'd given 'em better than they'd sent, and that sudden tight silence was an admission of the fact.

Somebody exclaimed, "By thunder, the kid's right! Hey, Johnny, hold 'er a minute! Drinks're are on. *Johnny!*"

But Johnny Warfield didn't even turn his head. With a kind of cold dignity, he walked to the batwing doors and had his hand out, about to push through, when a man reached out and tugged at his sleeve.

"Kid, you really told 'em that time," the man said.

Johnny said curtly, "Thanks," and without even a second glance at the man, slapped open the batwings and went on out. He was halfway up the block before he realized the man was walking along right beside him.

"YES sir," said the stranger, "you sure gave 'em the bittery end of the stick, sonny. I couldn't have admired to heard it said better."

Johnny halted. They were in front of the Jack Deuce Saloon, and in the light spraying out through the wicker doors

Johnny got a full look at the man's face. Except it was a little broad and flat, it wasn't a face you'd have noticed especially, till you looked at the eyes. Then you noticed it just for the eyes—a kind of cloudy blue color, but tight and hard, like they'd been whipped by too much sunlight.

Johnny gave the man a close attention and said, "New to these parts, ain't you, mister?"

The man held out his hand. "Name of Jim Devery. Come on in the Jack Deuce and I'll buy you a drink."

"Thanks all the same," Johnny said, "but I guess not tonight."

"You might as well," urged Devery. "I'm just killin' time, for tonight. Came in with a trail drive yesterday and heard an old friend of mine was the marshal here, Tom Peters. Figured I'd look him up."

"Tom's out of town tonight. Maybe you could hit him in the morning," Johnny said.

He watched the man and saw just a flicker of light come into Devery's eyes, then fade out. "Rather hit him tonight, if I could," Devery said. "Taken a notion from what I heard at the Spur that you'd know where he'd be at, if anybody would."

"No," Johnny said.

Devery shrugged. "Well then, that's that. Maybe I'll see you around, sonny," and turning, Devery entered the Jack Deuce.

Johnny stared at the back of Devery's head as he pushed through the swing doors and disappeared into the saloon. Under his flat-crowned black Stetson, Devery's hair, cut to a straight line at the rim of his collar, was a dead, dried-straw color.

Johnny knew, then, because Johnny made it a business to remember faces he wanted to remember—square faces or narrow faces, black hair or blond hair, whatever was important, in that way, Johnny chiseled down in his memory, and never forgot. And now he knew he had to find Tom Peters, and find him quick.

THE old-timer leaned forward across the hotel railing and threw his dead cigar over it.

The drummer fumbled in the pocket of his vest. "You mean," he said, handing the old-timer a fresh cigar, "that this Devery was—"

The old-timer struck a match, screwing his mouth comfortably around the fresh stogie.

He took a slow puff, said, "Yep," and went on. . . .

* * *

Johnny was waiting on Tom Peters' veranda when the marshal got back from the Ringbolts, at eleven o'clock. Tom, acting kind of old and petered out, trudging up the steps, didn't notice him till he was up on the porch, and then he let out a sort of yelp, and jerked around.

"Er—Mr. Peters?" Johnny said.

Tom glared at him. "I thought I told you to stay away from here."

"I—I know you did, Mr. Peters. But I'm afraid there's some trouble makin' up, and I thought—"

"You thought!" Peters snorted grimly. "By God, there'll be trouble all right if you don't rattle your hocks and high-tail it off this porch!"

Stubbornly, Johnny stood tracked. "Mr. Peters," Johnny said firmly, "I thought you ought to know Wild Dan Blackaby's in town. I just talked to him—not more'n an hour ago."

Tom Peters stiffened. "Blackaby—in Apache Wells? You're loco! You wouldn't know Dan Blackaby from a hole in the wall."

"Why, now, Mr. Peters, I wouldn't say that," said Johnny Warfield, with mild reproof in his voice. "The way I rec'lect it, Dan Blackaby's five foot ten and a half, wears a 7¾ black Stetson and a size nine saddle-stitched boot, has a kind of square, light-complected face, blue eyes, blond hair cut straight at the back of his neck, and a dark mole at the lower left-hand corner of his chin."

"For God's sake," Peters breathed.

"I was at the trial of his brother Shep, is how I happen to remember," explained Johnny matter-of-factly.

Tom Peters shook his head in kind of a slow, dazed way. Then he growled out, "Come into the house, Johnny," and opened the front door.

Johnny stood in the parlor beside him while he lighted a green-shaded table lamp. He turned up the wick, then swung around and gave Johnny a slow up and down look, like he was really sizing him up for the first time.

"Don't happen to know which toenail Dan's got the most dirt under, do you?" he grumbled.

Johnny grinned. "No sir, I don't guess I've worked it out quite that fine, Mr. Peters."

"Hmph!" Tom reached down and pulled open a drawer of the deal lamp table. He fumbled around in it for a minute, then flushed out a twenty-dollar bill.

"I owe you a new hat, Johnny. This ought to buy you a middlin' good one."

Johnny shook his head. "I didn't do this for money, Mr. Peters. I couldn't take that," he protested in a hurt voice. Hopefully, he added quickly, "But if you could use a special deputy for a couple of days—what I thought was, with Wild Dan coyotin' around and all—"

Tom interrupted flatly: "That's out, Johnny. Maybe in another year or so, but right now I—" He stopped suddenly, catching a yearning, vacant expression in Johnny's eyes. Then he noticed that Johnny's absorbed stare was directed at the white hat.

On a sudden impulse, he yanked it off. "Here," he said gruffly, "take this, then. I been aimin' to get me a new one, anyway."

A stunned look froze Johnny's face. "But—but that's the Wyatt Earp hat, Mr. Peters! You couldn't—I mean—it wouldn't be right—"

"Oh, here. Take it!" Tom thrust it at the kid with an exasperated gesture. "Wear it in good health, Johnny. And now you better be moseyin' along. I got work to do."

Johnny cradled the hat in his outstretched hands, and for a minute I don't guess he even breathed. Then, like he was in a kind of trance, he put it on. It was too big. But his oversize ears held it in place.

"Jeekers, Mr. Peters! You—you sure you want me to—"

"I'm sure, damn it! Oh, and Johnny! You see Sally May, you tell her the porch-sittin' franchise has been reopened, and to get to hell back to the reservation."

Moving like a sleepwalker, Johnny weaved to the door, turned an imaginary knob on the wrong side before he found the right one, then, the Wyatt Earp relic gripped firmly in his hand, stumbled out into the night.

On the porch, his fingers trembled as he took off the hat and stared down at it, gliding a hand across the velvety white felt. It sure was a beautiful hunk of hat, Johnny thought. Even in the dark it seemed to give off a wonderful pale glow. He put it on again, trying it at several different positions before finally settling on a rakish jack-deuce angle, down over his off eye.

THE hat imbued him with a cocky feeling, and down off the porch he went towards the boardwalk at a slow, practicing shuffle, like Wyatt Earp moving in to bury a man. The Peters house didn't have a gate, just a couple of wide wooden gate posts at the entrance to the town walk, and approaching these Johnny came to a gliding halt, dipped suddenly, and slapped a hand to his hip.

"Well, why don't you shoot?" Johnny sneered at the warm spring night. He took a firm, deliberate step. "I'll tell you why," Johnny said, and advanced another step. "You're cold-footed, is why. Hell-on-wheels when you can shoot a man backside, but when you can't—"

The splinters flew right into Johnny's mouth. They came from the top of the hollow wooden gate post, where the bullet struck. And the bullet, Johnny judged from the spout of flame that had just leaped towards him out of the darkness, came from a dark alley across the street, between Ike Barney's feed store and the Eagle Mercantile.

Johnny spat out the splinters and let out a fierce yawp. "Quit it!" he yelled. "I taken one josh tonight, but that don't mean I—"

A second shot drummed against the silence, and then Johnny knew it wasn't any hooraw. He felt a jolting blow against his left shoulder, and when he reached out and tried to grab at the gate post it seemed to slide away from him in the dark and he fell forward, his head striking

against the weathered wooden shank.

Still dizzy from the shock, Johnny was trying to hoist himself erect when the front door slammed open and Tom Peters came tearing out of the house. Tom was almost to the gate when another bullet whistled, and he threw himself flat beside Johnny. He didn't know Johnny'd been hit, but he did know that whoever had laid that ambush had spotted the white hat and had assumed it was his topknot under it. Suddenly, more angry at himself than at Johnny, he cuffed out a hand and sent the hat spinning off Johnny's head.

"Now stay out of this!" he whispered fiercely, and then as a fourth shot banged out from across the street, he jerked up his gun and fired at the flash.

A splintering crash came from the alley, like a sound of empty crates smashing, and then there was a dead, sudden silence. Ignoring Johnny, Tom Peters started crawling away from the gate post. A big azalia bush stood a few feet beyond it, and he was raising cautiously behind this when another shot slammed. Tom's right leg jerked back, and then it buckled and he crashed into the azalia.

The sharp branches tore the gun out of his hand, and he was scrabbling around in the dark for it, cursing under his breath, when a near sound caught his attention and he twisted around and saw a vague shadow behind him.

Then he saw something else, and his eyes bugged out with shock. The hat! For a spooky moment, he taken a notion the danged thing was walking along all by itself, and then he saw Johnny Warfield's big ears sticking up under it.

"Take it off, you blasted knothead!" Tom blurted hoarsely, as Johnny came creeping on. "Hell's fire, you—"

"I was only aimin' to help," Johnny murmured apologetically. Then, in an eager whisper: "Mr. Peters, I got a notion how we kin—"

Tom cried in a throttled voice: "Take off that hat—*take it off!*" then sank back with a despairing groan as Johnny started wriggling on past him, murmuring over his shoulder, "I'll only be a minute, Mr. Peters."

Tom's leg had been busted at the kneecap, and he couldn't move, and he couldn't find his gun. All he could do was stay hunkered where he was, and pray.

He stared, goggle-eyed, as Johnny reached the foot-high ledge of the board walk and bellied down under it. Then Johnny took off the hat.

Tom let out a tight breath, then quickly drew it in again as he saw the hat move. Johnny had his left hand inside the hat, and was raising it slowly over the crown of the walk. A wicked little spat of flame leaped from the alley and the hat jumped, pinwheeling away in the darkness.

Then Johnny Warfield fired. . . .

"HE got Blackaby?" the drummer interrupted tensely.

The old-timer grunted. "Plumb center." He stretched his stiffened legs, threw away his cigar, and rose creakily.

A faint skepticism tinged the drummer's voice. "And now he's the *marshal* here?"

Impassively, the old-timer nodded. "Funny how things work out, ain't it? Johnny kind of got over his coltishness, though, after he married Sally May. Named their kid for old Tom—Thomas Peters Warfield. And soon after that Johnny give the white hat back to Tom—for kind of a souvenir, like."

"Well," the drummer said, "I guess the drinks are on me, Pop."

He started to turn, then stopped, staring back open-mouthed as the old-timer stooped to pick up his hat.

It was a big, pure-white Stetson. And drilled through its gleaming peaked crown was a neat round hole, of about the size a .45 makes.

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Johanson stood by Chet, while the other two were on the other end of the log boom, keeping it in the current with the poles

CHAPTER ONE

Half Interest in Boothill?

THOSE considered wise in the ways of the Upper Yellowstone agreed it was impossible. In summer, and before the fall freeze, yes. But in spring it was suicide to nose a packet into that swollen yellow torrent.

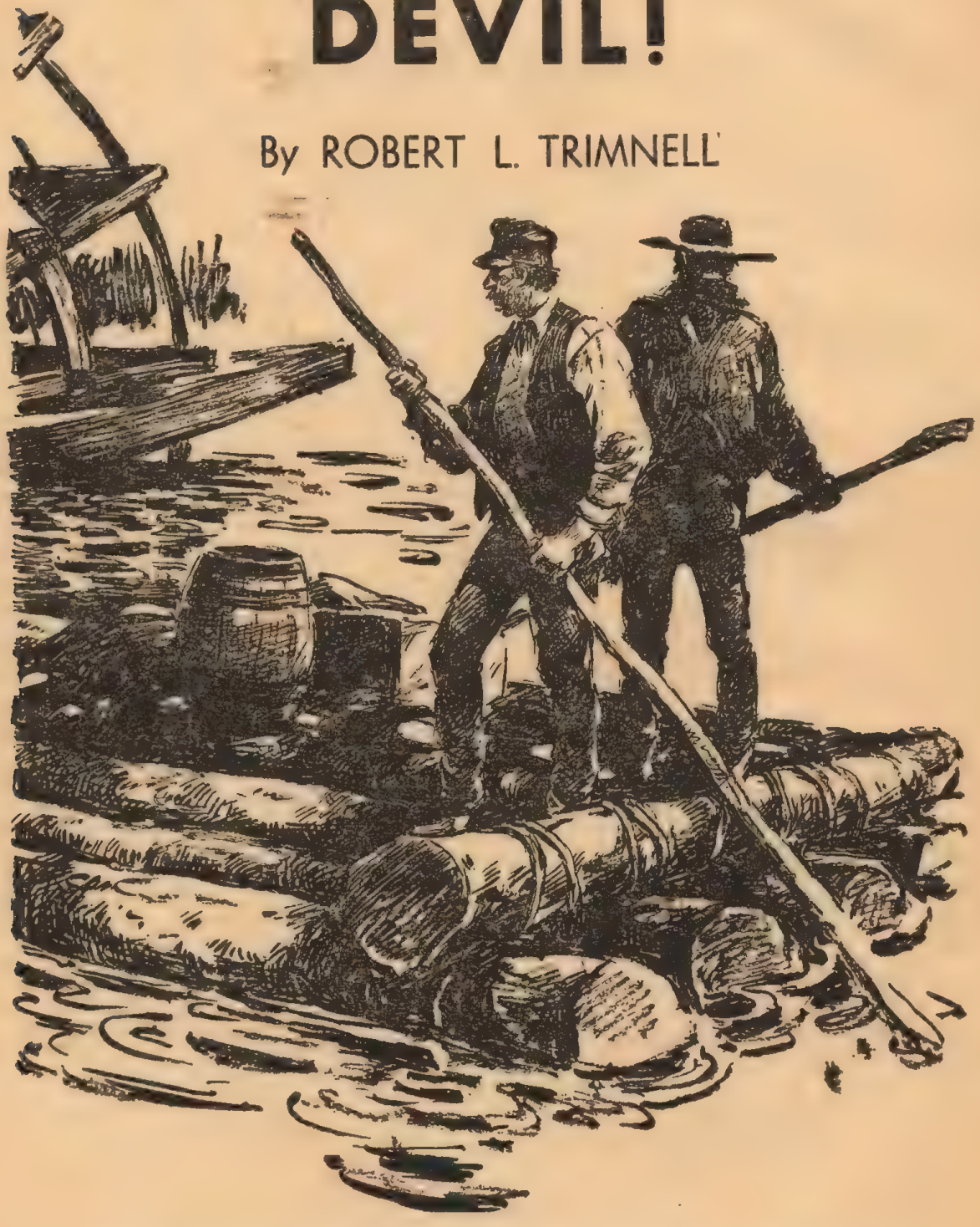
Captain Chauncy Adams disagreed. He had held a pilot's card for the Mississippi and Missouri forty years, and his interpretation of that card was that he could take the *Martha A* over any tributary of those rivers as long as he had a couple inches of water under his keel. Spring floods made it all the merrier, for he then had hundreds of inches under the keel, and the hurtling logs and debris were merely playful obstacles for a clever ship handler to avoid.

It was a terrible night. The *Martha A* wallowed in sweeps of inky water. She jerked away from sandbars that had appeared overnight, crunched headlong into floating debris, yielded a few splinters from her stout planking and groaned her way ahead.

Despite the gusts of rain, both doors to the pilothouse were open, and Captain Adams ran from the starboard side of the

WHITE WATER DEVIL!

By ROBERT L. TRIMNELL



Many are the tales white water men tell of the Upper Yellowstone, but none so strange as that of Pilot Chet Burke, who planned to raise the packet "Martha A"— to sell her to the river's devil!

Texas through the pilothouse and out to the port deck, yelling orders to the helmsman, yanking the engineroom telegraph himself, cursing the wind and rain and every sandbar from The Forks to Elk Bend. He was a little man in river pants and blue gold-buttoned jacket, continually swearing and banging a dollop of tobacco juice at the brass cuspidor each time he raced through the pilothouse.

There were some who said the helmsman didn't obey his orders. Some said the night was so dark he could have run into the sandstone bluffs without knowing it. But the result was the same: A grinding crash forward that seemed to tear the very keelsons off. The *Martha A* swung, stern riding hard to starboard, and then the stern crashed. After that it was all over. The *Martha A* was sinking by the head. Captain Adams clanked frantically at the engineroom telegraph and screamed down the speaking tube for the black gang to get up on deck. It wasn't necessary. Already there was the shriek of escaping steam. The chief engineer opened all petcocks, flooded water into the fires and then scrambled up the ladder after his men. In spite of the frantic hurry, the crew lowered a boat and made shore. They stood there in the rain and waited for the boilers to explode.

They didn't blow; perhaps the water didn't reach them until they had cooled; perhaps the chief's work in letting off steam had been successful. It made little difference. The *Martha A* lay with her starboard rail under water, her deck tilted until walking on it would be almost impossible even without the mud and slime that began to collect.

The wreck occupied conversation in Yellowstone Bend for some weeks, and the sages nodded with conviction. Any man who took a packet up the Yellowstone in the spring deserved it, they said.

But to himself each admitted his admiration for the man who had tried it.

THE saloon they called Sam's, down on the Yellowstone wharfs, wasn't the best place in town. The whiskey was cheap, and for that reason fur traders with poor catches, failing homesteaders and rivermen on the beach frequented it.

That was why a tall man with a blue pilot's coat and shiny-visored cap seemed out of place. His jutting jaw was too well-shaven for Sam's, the gold buttons on his coat were too polished. He entered the place with long strides, went straight to the bartender.

His voice was quiet and well mannered. "Looking for Captain Chauncy Adams," he said.

The bartender scanned him, thought of snickering at his entering Sam's in the clothes of a successful river pilot. But he saw the set of the man's chin and the level gray stare of his eyes. He jerked a thumb to the right. "Drunkest man at that end of the bar," he said.

The pilot nodded, paced unhurriedly through a crowd of wharf rats. A small man crouched over the bar, a bottle in his right hand, a glass in his left. His shoulders seemed shrunken within his wrinkled blue coat, his gray hair sticking out like old straw from under a visored cap that bore the black mark of a boot across the once-white top.

"Captain Adams?" the tall pilot said.

The little man turned his face to the left, as if with great effort, and fixed bloodshot blue eyes on the pilot's face. "Cap'n Cha'ncy Adams." He laughed a bit to himself and repeated it. "Cap'n Cha'ncy Adams, sir. On'y springtime pilot on the Upper Yellastone." He grinned in twisted fashion. "Who're you?"

"Chet Burke." He glanced around the room. "There's a table over there where we can talk. I've got business with you." He took the oldster's arm in a big tanned hand.

"No!" the little captain squeaked. "Talk here! Got my bottle—" He clutched bottle and glass tightly as the big man plucked him away from the bar and half-carried, half-supported him to a far corner of the room. He lowered Adams into a barrel-backed chair, pulled another up alongside.

"Your packet went down a month ago, right?"

Sadness swept the captain's face and sobered it for a minute. He shook it off. "Have a drink!" A trembling hand shoved the bottle across the table. Chet picked it up and took a swig off the top to pacify the other.

"It was on broken standstone, the way I hear the story. How bad was she ripped? And where? Could you tell me where she was hit?"

The captain's back stiffened. "Could I tell where? If a man kicked me in the belly could I tell where I'd been hit?" He blew out his breath noisily, then downed another drink. "Sta'board keelson, ten foot aft of the bow. Stern, she got her bilge mashed in just aft o' the engine room. Know it was there. Any farther for'a'd and she'd let the river into the engineroom. Would of blowed her clear to St. Joe."

Chet grinned at him, at the degree of soberness obtained when the oldster's boat knowledge was scorned. He pulled a pair of cigars from his pocket, handed one to Adams.

"What's it worth to you to have her raised, Captain?"

The little man was scratching a match on the table top. He looked up so suddenly that the match broke in two. "Worth? What's it worth, he says! A million dollars, you young egg-headed fool! Ten million! A million million! But all I got between me and no more whiskey is a dollar and a half."

"Is it worth a half interest in the packet?"

The oldster's eyes narrowed. Then his lips trembled. He poured another drink, gulped it down feverishly. "Nobody'd put up the cash to raise her. Nobody'll believe when I tell them she ain't hurt bad. An' she lays there, rottin', and in a year she won't be worth kindlin' wood."

"I'll raise her for half interest," Chet said. He drew a notebook from his pocket, scratched out a note. He held it for the oldster to read.

Captain Adams grunted. "High price." The note read, *I will transfer half of ownership rights in the stern wheel packet* Martha A *when Chester Burke, registered Mississippi and Missouri river pilot, rights her and ties her to the wharf in Yellowstone Bend.*

Adams took the pencil Chet handed him, licked it and scrawled his name. "Thet there name's as good as any notary judge's fool stamp and five witnesses."

Chet stood up, pocketed the notebook. "I've heard that, Captain," he said smiling. "In dealing with some people I would have had a notary and five witnesses. And now, good day, Captain Adams. If I cannot raise the *Martha A,* you will have lost nothing. If I do, you will gain half a river packet." He shook the oldster's limp hand, watched sorrowfully as the old fellow poured himself another drink. Then he turned and left the cheap cigar smoke and smell of unwashed bodies of Sam's behind him.

SAM'S, Chet Burke knew, was not the best saloon in Yellowstone Bend. His course took him next to the best saloon. Course was the correct word for it. In the month since he had abandoned his job as pilot on a sluggish, wide-beamed Yankton-to-Omaha cattle boat, he had set a straight-course. Pilots drew good pay. As the son of a river marsh homesteader, he had once thought of pilot's pay as a fortune. Then, with thousands of miles of muddy water behind him, and having accumulated a little cash and a reputation as one of the smartest pilots on the Big Muddy, he had decided that a pilot earned little enough. Even a smart, careful pilot such as he. Always careful. That was why he was trying the salvage of the *Martha A.* It would be a cheap salvage job with little cash risk. But he wanted nothing so flimsy as a half-interest in a boat that had a drunken, worn-out captain as half-owner, a captain who believed he could conquer the springtime Yellowstone. Chet believed in cash. That was why he went tonight to the best saloon in Yellowstone Bend. Russ Kruner's Golden House.

It was evening when he arrived, scraped the street mud off his boots on the broad boardwalk before the saloon. He straightened his cap, glanced up at the huge gilt letters glowing redly between the coal oil torches on either side of the sign.

GOLDEN HOUSE it read. Small, neat lettering below admitted that it was the property of Russ Kruner. There was a warehouse near-by that also bore the Kruner name, and a dozen mule-drawn trains that ran two hundred miles each way from Yellowstone Bend were Kruner property.

Chet took a cigar from his coat pocket, bit off the end as he stared at the sign.

His right hand strayed to his coat pocket, touched the Frontier Colt that bulged there. Kruner's reputation seemed to call for the security of the gun. He scratched a match on a brass coat button, touched the flame to his cigar. Then he pushed inside.

The Golden House was as smoky as Sam's. But it was the smoke of good Havana cigars. There were as many drunks as in Sam's, but they drank from thin glasses and their tastes ran more to mixes of bourbon and vermouth than to straight raw whiskey. There were girls here too, with short dresses and low neck lines and high squealing voices. Chet moved slowly through the crowd, noted the stovepipe hats of the gamblers, the fine-tooled boots and hoarse laughter of cattle kings, the nautical twang of the river men.

He found a hole at the bar, moved in and called the bartender. The man eyed him narrowly. "You got business with the boss?"

"He needs the business more than I do."

The bartender stared at him for a minute. "I'll call Willard, then." He signaled to a small man who slipped out of the crowd. Willard had a narrow, fox-like face, and was dressed in sober black except for a bright green vest. He nodded to Chet, led him to a hallway in the back of the saloon. They stopped before a door.

"You carryin' any iron?" Willard said.

"I always carry it, friend. Kruner can see me with it in my pocket or he isn't going to see me. As I told the bartender, he needs me more'n I need him."

The little man stared up at him. He glanced aside. "Guess it's all right. Russ ain't afraid."

He turned and knocked on a door. A voice boomed. He pointed for Chet to go in.

Russ Kruner was a short man, broad and hard-muscled. He sat at a polished walnut desk, big, flat-fingered hands meshed together. His face was wide and heavy, dominated by a broad jaw and piercing eyes.

"You wanted to see Russ Kruner?" he said.

Chet nodded, walked up to the desk. He saw the diamond in Kruner's tie, and the smooth expanse of brown worsted material on the man's shoulders.

"It's about the *Martha A,*" he said.

Kruner blinked. "And what would I have to do with the *Martha A*?"

There was a slight stir, the scratching of a heel. Chet glanced to the left. The lamplight was dim there, and he had not noticed the crinolined easy chair. A girl was sitting there.

"Sorry," Chet said. "I don't want to interrupt—"

"Get out of here, Charlotte," Kruner growled.

The girl stood up. Chet sucked in his breath. Her dress was short, showing long shapely legs, and it was cut low enough to show firm white flesh in the lamplight. Her hair startled him. Red as a fire, long enough to spill over her shoulders, framing a pale face and enormous blue eyes. She was rouged, obviously one of the dance girls, although the rouge was better applied than most knew how to do.

"I'm not leaving," she spat. Then she went over to the desk and perched on the edge. She dropped the sharpness that was in her voice, and purred. "Russ, you know I'm interested in business, and I want to hear what goes on. You know I'm not like the rest of them." She shook her head in the direction of the saloon. Then she turned to Chet. "And the captain doesn't mind, does he, Captain—"

"Chet Burke, river pilot," he filled in. He smiled at her in a formal way, at the same time admiring the bronze sheen of her hair. He glanced away quickly even before he saw the hard stare in Kruner's eyes.

"In what way did you think I might be interested in the *Martha A,* Mr. Burke?" Kruner said. He took a cigar from a box on his desk, jammed it into his mouth and leaned forward. "Sit down, Charlotte," he growled, without looking at the girl.

SHE pouted at him, flung herself into the chair again and pretended to be bored. Chet was sure it was pretense. But it did not concern him. He pondered Kruner's words for a minute. "In what way might I be interested—" There was a strange sound to the man's

voice. Chet found his palms were wet. Something seemed wrong here. He touched a thumbnail to the hard outline of the Colt in his pocket.

"I thought," he said, "that a man who would be in competition with an up-river packet would be interested in what happened to the hulk."

Kruner smiled, leaned back in his chair. A tension seemed to have left him. He laughed, and there was a high nervous ring to it.

"Naturally, Mr. Burke. A competitor is always interested."

"I'm going to float the *Martha A.* I will be in a position to sell half-interest. Since your wagon outfits also serve the upper part of the river, it seems that an interest in the packet would benefit you. It would dovetail in with your business, perhaps."

Kruner nodded, smiling broadly. "If you can float the *Martha A,* Mr. Burke. If. You know, of course, that most boats that sink on the river are never recovered."

"My price is ten thousand," Chet said. "Interested?"

"Yes." Kruner almost spat it out. "I'll pay it. The day you bring the *Martha A* to the dock."

Chet nodded, turned to the door. He stepped outside and ran a hand across his forehead. What was the matter with him? He was sweating. Something was wrong in that office. He went to the bar and ordered a drink. The salvage job hadn't scared him, tough work as it would be. But something in Kruner's office had shaken him. Tones of voices. The girl. He didn't know. Then he felt a hand touch his arm lightly. He turned.

"Mr. Burke?" It was the girl. Charlotte, Kruner had called her. Standing close and smiling up at him.

He smiled back. "Drink?" he said.

"No. Dance with me." She took the glass out of his hand, set it down on the bar and then led him to the dance floor. A piano banged out music. He moved his feet slowly, unsure of his dancing, and still more unsure of dancing with this girl. He didn't think Kruner would care for that sort of thing. She danced well, close to him, and he could feel the heat and soft roundness of her form.

"Why do you want to sell out to Kruner?" she said. Her head was close to his shoulder, and she spoke with little lip movement, a whisper that went no farther than his ear.

"I'll sell to anybody that puts up the ten thousand. Kruner was just the most likely choice."

She was quiet for a while. He glanced down, saw that her blue eyes were half hidden under a frown.

"It would not be good to float that packet," she said. "Dangerous. Understand?" Her voice became flat and hard.

"No. I don't understand."

Suddenly she was rigid. He glanced down. "I'll make you understand!" she snapped. A small, hard fist came up, smashed into his teeth.

The shock made him reel back and there was blood in his mouth. A lip split open. She screamed then. "Charlie! Throw this river rat out!" She lunged at him, pounding his face with her fists, kicking his ankles. He backed, tried to hold her off with one hand. Then he saw Charlie. A giant of a man with wide bulging shoulders and a long knife scar from right ear to chin. Charlie came in swinging heavy fists.

The big bouncer was scowling, plowing through the gathering crowd on the dance floor. "Throw him out, Charlie!" the girl cried. Charlie rammed out a big fist. Chet rode with it, brought his right up, smashed it into a rock-like jaw. Surprised, the bouncer grunted, took a flurry of fists that Chet slammed at him. Then he came in again, heavy and panting, driving a fist that caught Chet's jaw, made him see black. Then it was just slugging, crashing fists at each other. Chet backed away.

Something caught his eye. It was Willard. The small man who had taken him to Kruner's office was slipping a derringer from his pocket, lifting it and leveling it at him. Chet's hand instinctively dove to his right coat pocket, gripped the Frontier Colt. That was when Charlie hit him. A fist like a cannonball rammed into his face. It felt like a lump of dried mud being shattered by a horse's shod hoof.

He was out then, being dragged by the big hand at his collar, butted through the batwings, landing flat in the mud of the

street. The wet mud revived him. He sat up and stared at the batwings. Light and tinny music filtered out.

Painfully he pushed to his feet. He began to climb the porch and walk toward the batwings. Then he stopped. He shook his head. In the Golden House, the cards were stacked against him. He knew he would meet Willard and Charlie again. He turned and walked toward the docks.

CHAPTER TWO

The Dead Floats Again

IT WAS a fine day on the river. Warm enough that Chet Burke stood on the bow of the log raft wearing only a shirt and worn denim pants. The sleeves were rolled above his elbows, showing well-muscled arms, hands stuck into his pockets. His cap was pulled low, a cigar jutted from his teeth. Calmly, he watched the river ahead.

There were three other men on the raft. A big red-faced Swede named Johanson who Chet knew to be a good shipfitter, two smaller men who claimed to be carpenters. The Duncan brothers. Johanson stood by Chet, while the other two were on the after end of the log boom, keeping it in the current with poles.

"She look pretty bad, Chet," Johanson rumbled.

Chet stared at the *Martha A,* a few hundred yards off the port bow. The packet had washed off the shore of broken sandstone, mud willows and marsh grass. In patches she was still gleaming white. But most was marked by high water, a greasy gray stain. The starboard rail and half the lower deck were under water, and her black twin stacks were at such a crazy angle that a good wind could snap them off.

"Ay wish we had some shipfitters to help, Chet," Johanson said. His voice dropped. "Them Duncans, they're good boys, but—"

Chet grinned at him. "The Duncan brothers were city marshals in Rivertown, Johanson. They cleaned the place up, worked themselves out of a job. Besides, they've carpentered some."

Johanson frowned. "Well, Ay t'ink we're maybe thirty miles from law. Mebbe we need them boys some time."

Chet picked up a coil of rope as the greasy bow of the *Martha A* loomed before them. He had no doubt that there would be work besides carpentering for the Duncans. For the week since he was at the Golden House he had been sure of it. The insane action of Charlotte in starting the fight. Kruner's strange talk. And tales that he had heard about rival wagon trains that contested Kruner's monopoly. They had "Indian" trouble. Chet figured Kruner might well have had a hand in the sinking of the *Martha A.* The man obviously liked nothing to stand in the way of his freighting monopoly.

Yet, if he got the packet to Yellowstone Bend, he knew Kruner would buy his share out. Chet knew that, even if some of the things that had happened didn't make sense. He had plotted his course straight for that. He had bought the raft of light logs at Rivertown. It was a shrewd purchase. He intended to use the logs for floating the *Martha A,* then resell them to a down-river lumber mill.

They tied the raft alongside, then clambered up to the slippery deck of the packet. It was a ghost ship, a month dead and already taking on the marks of decay. Mud was a foot deep in the main deck cabins. The back of a plush chair, stained beyond recognition, was sticking out of the mud and water next to the starboard rail.

They cleaned up the galley well enough to cook for themselves, cleaned out the crew's bunkroom so they'd have a place to sleep. Then they went to work.

Chet had decided to raise the stern, since it was likely the least damaged. His method was simple. They floated four logs to the starboard side of the deck aft, laid them across the ship, bolted them to the deck, with fifteen feet protruding over the starboard gunwale. Working sometimes in shoulder-deep water, they bolted them fast to the heavy deck timbers. Then they began sliding logs underneath the protruding logs. It was back-breaking work, hooking the logs off the raft, driving them under the water to lodge beneath the mass next to the packet.

Slowly, the boat began to swing. The logs, light and buoyant, pushed the starboard side up, slowly leveling the deck.

Chet stripped, dove into the water and swam down under the mass of logs. It was pitch dark, impossible to see anything. He had to feel along the smooth side of the ship, push up for air, go back down and feel again. Finally he found it. Just above the mud, a gaping hole big enough for a man to climb through. Satisfied, he returned to the deck.

"We've got to shove logs under there until we push this rail up and the port one down under water. Then we'll have the hole clear. We can patch it and start pumping."

They nodded agreement and went back to work.

IT WAS the next day when they went down into the hold. The packet was tilted far to port now, and light showed through the gaping hole aft. As shipfitter, Johanson bossed the job of taking planks and timbers below, bolting them into the wound. The mud was deep down there, and the only light was what came through a five-foot square hatch on deck. They worked stripped to the waist, sawing planks and beams on improvised saw horses whose legs were under water.

Chet was passing lumber down to them when he saw it. A rowboat, putting out from the opposite shore and moving toward the packet. At the half-way mark he could identify them. The small man with the green vest, the one who had drawn a derringer on him in the Golden House. Two burly fellows rowing. And sitting in the bow, a girl with hair that blazed like red gold in the sunlight.

"We got visitors," he called down. "Some of Russ Kruner's friends."

"We bane busy," Johanson yelled up. "Half hour we haf this done, Chet. You joost watch them. Watch good. Ay told you, they's no good in that Kruner."

Chet climbed across the sloping deck, braced one boot on the port rail, which was a foot underwater. The four in the boat were grim-faced, intent. He frowned. But, he told himself, Kruner would want to know about the progress of the work. After all, he would be paying ten thousand for his half of the packet.

Willard was the first out of the boat, smiling at Chet with a toothiness that left the rest of his face blank. He helped the girl out to the slippery deck. Her dress was not so low-cut as the one Chet had seen her wearing at the Golden House, but it was a flimsy, impractical blue satin. Her shoes were high heeled and shiny.

"We came to see how the work was going," Willard said.

"A sight-seeing party?" Chet said.

The girl scowled at him, said nothing. The two rowers, he thought, were wharf rats who could be hired for any job concerning either strong backs or sharp knives. Then he saw that one was Charlie, the bouncer. He felt his fists knot.

"Sightseeing, yes," Willard said. He showed a little more of white teeth. "Business, too, of course. But it's such a beautiful day for sightseeing. I hear hammering. You have men working here perhaps?"

Chet eyed him coldly, took a butted cigar from his shirt pocket, stuck it between his teeth and lit it. "Yes. I have men working, perhaps." He made no move to leave, stood with his hands in his pockets, staring down at the gambler.

Willard laughed nervously. He climbed the deck to the hatch leading down into the after hold. He peered down at the three men working there. Chet came up alongside him. They stood staring down to where Johanson was fitting the last plank in, augering out holes for the bolts. Chet was impatient. He didn't trust the gambler. He sucked angrily on his cigar. That was when they hit him.

The cigar seemed to jump out of his mouth, a glowing brand that looped down into the hold. He heard Johanson yell and felt what must be a timber smashing into the back of his head. His knees were rubber and he tumbled through the open hatch, slammed against the bulkhead, knew he would be killed when he hit bottom. But he seemed to land in a cushion of arms. Then it was all black.

IT WAS still black when the water hit his face and he shook his head. The back of his head was a blazing lump. The darkness was not in his head. The hatch above had been closed. Johanson and the Duncan brothers stood around him, waist deep in the water. He was fairly dry, lying across some saw horses.

"We're trapped down here, Chet," the

older Duncan said. "We've tried lifting that hatch. They got somethin' piled on top of it. And my guess is they're goin' to set a fire."

Chet growled, shook his head. He climbed the ladder up to the hatch, braced his shoulder against it. It didn't budge. But it wasn't quite tight, and there was a crack that let a slant of light through—and a whiff of smoke.

His heart sank. "You're right, Duncan. Fire. And we're damn neatly trapped." He crouched there on the ladder, glad he couldn't see their faces. He stiffened his legs against the ladder and threw all his strength against the hatch. He strained until the lump on his head was fire that pounded into his brain. He wrapped an arm around the ladder, because raw nausea was tearing at his stomach. For a moment he clung there, then found he was able to speak.

"How long to tear out that hole again, Johanson?"

The big Swede growled, then muttered under his breath, "Too long."

Chet seemed to feel space closing in on him. The smoke was stronger. And then there was a scratching, a scrabbling of bolts above. His heart jumped. The heavy hatch raised a half inch, shot in a blinding flood of light. He braced his back against the hatch and heaved it open. He rolled himself out on the muddy deck, blinking in the light, opening the hatch wide. Smoke swirled around him. Then he saw the girl.

Her legs and dress were plastered with mud, her hands grimy with it. She had discarded the impractical shoes. She stared at him, unsmiling.

"Even rats shouldn't die like that," she said.

Smoke was billowing down from the texas, gushing out of the main deck staterooms. Charlie lunged out a doorway, a flaming brand in his hand. Chet grabbed up a two-by-four beam from the deck. He heard his men scrambling out of the hatch. He let out a yell and ran, skidding, across the sloping deck. Charlie went into a crouch, moved forward slowly, the torch in his right hand, his left feeling for the Colt jammed into his belt.

Chet raised the beam, felt cold anger flood through his arms. Charlie had hit him twice when he wasn't looking, and Charlie was going to pay for that. The man hurled his torch at Chet. He ignored it, felt it thump and scorch his bare chest, saw the bouncer yank the gun out of his belt. He slammed the beam down and it jerked his shoulders as it crashed into the man's arms. Charlie howled and the Colt thumped to the deck. Chet gripped the beam like a club and swung it, hard. It caught the big man's shoulder, drove him crashing into a bulkhead. Chet dropped the beam, battered his fists into the man's face until the bouncer slumped like an empty sack. When it was done he picked up the Colt, stuck it into his own belt.

He turned. The girl was still standing over the open hatch, her chin high. She stared at him angrily. He heard a yell.

"We got them fellers, Chet!" It was Johanson. There was a thumping on the ladder. The body of one wharf rat came sliding down, the two Duncans running after it. Both men were carrying caulking hammers. They picked up the unconscious man. Johanson pounded down, dragging Willard, one big hand holding the little man by his coat collar.

"He's killing me, Burke!" Willard screamed. Johanson growled at him, rapped the man's head with the handle of the sledge in his right hand.

"To the boat," Chet told them. He grabbed Charlie by the legs, dragged him down the slanting deck to the port rail. They dumped the three into the boat, shoved it out into the current. Then they set themselves to the work of stopping the fire.

Chet stood on the crazily-tilting texas, hauling buckets of water up by a rope, passing them to Johanson who heaved them into the burning staterooms. So much of the ship was water-soaked that the fire had made little headway. But they worked frantically, flinging water on burning mattresses and drapes, woodwork that was blazing, rugs that the fire-setters had heaped against wooden paneling. He dropped the buckets automatically, hooked them into the water, yanked them up and handed them to Johanson. One time the grip on the bucket was lighter, less sure. He turned. Charlotte was taking the bucket from him, hurrying to the end of the texas with it. Her feet were bare,

stockings torn through, dress ripped. He scratched his head. She didn't make a darned bit of sense, that woman. He dropped another bucket over, handed it to Johanson when it came up full of muddy water.

A half hour later the Duncan brothers climbed up from the main deck, exhaustion showing in their faces. But they grinned. "Fire's out down there."

Johanson had slumped down next to a bulkhead, shoving the empty water bucket aside. His big red face wrinkled into a grin. He looked up at the girl, who stood leaning against the rail, and his grin widened. He shoved to his feet, pushed a big hand out to her.

"T'anks, girl. You save our lifes."

She gave him the ghost of a smile. Then she frowned. "I couldn't let anybody burn like that." She looked down at her ruined dress. Then she turned and left them, walking back to one of the officers' cabins, going inside and shutting the door.

"I guess she's got a right to be secretive," Chet said. "She saved our lives. But she nearly had me killed in the Golden House that night." He turned to the rail, shaded his eyes. The boat that Willard and his men had been set adrift in was manned now, a pair of oars driving it for the opposite shore. "They'll think twice before they come sightseeing again," he grinned.

Johanson laughed. "Ay t'ink that feller need some new ribs, after I hit him in the chest with my sledge." He started down the ladder. "We need coffee, boys," he said. They followed him down.

They were sitting in the tilted galley, pouring the first of the steaming coffee, ten minutes later. There was a clomp of boots outside. Chet jammed a hand down to the Colt he had stuck in his belt. Then he relaxed. It was the girl. She stood in the doorway, smiling at them.

Her hair was freshly brushed, a blaze of red as light filtered through it. She had washed, was wearing a man's white shirt, rolled up on the arms and a ship's officer's white pants. The legs were tucked into river boots that seemed to fit well enough, and a black belt pulled the pants in tight about her waist. "Any coffee left?" she said.

Gallantly, the big Swede ushered her to a seat, poured a big mug full of steaming coffee. She gulped at it.

"Funny that you found boots small enough," Chet said.

She gulped some more coffee. "The captain was a small man."

"You knew him?"

A strange look crossed her face. She set her lips tight. "He's well enough known in Yellowstone Bend."

Chet leaned forward. "And why did you have me thrown out of the Golden House?"

Her chin went up and she stared hard at him. "I play a lone hand, Burke." Then her chin dropped, and the blue eyes went soft. "This time my lone hand backfired. I'm finished with Russ Kruner. Willard is almost Kruner's partner, and you can see—"

They all nodded. The others were too sympathetic, Chet thought. They didn't know how close she had been to Kruner, how involved with his schemes.

"You won't get this packet to Yellowstone Bend," she said.

Chet grinned. "We've beaten Kruner's men off once."

She laughed. "I'm still aboard, Burke. I might decide to start a fire—"

Chet jerked to his feet, leaning across the table. "I'd take that pretty neck of yours and make it look like old rope!"

She leaned back in her chair, sipped on the coffee. Her voice came out soft and sultry. "No you wouldn't, Burke." She smiled at him, her eyes half closed. "No you wouldn't. You wouldn't touch me, unless I let you."

There was nothing he could say to that.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood on the River

ALL that afternoon they worked a hand pump in the engineroom. By dark the water was low enough that they could start a fire. They pitched down the driest of the cordwood stacked on deck, and Chet crawled into the huge furnace, shoveled out wet ashes and then laid the fire. They stood watches that night, building the fire until it could take wet wood.

Slowly the steam pressure rose. At dawn, Chet hooked in the engineroom power pump. A steady stream of water began gushing out over the side.

He was in high spirits. Dawn broke a rosy light through the river mists, and his wet clothes began to dry. In a few hours the engine room would be pumped out, and they could turn the pumps on the after hold. By noon they could begin moving logs away from the stern and start lifting the bow.

The others were in the galley making breakfast. Chet stood leaning against the rail, staring out over the disappearing mists to the mud flats, watching the yellow swirls of water. Then he was conscious of someone beside him. He felt the girl's arm touch his. Without looking he knew she was staring out over the water too. Chet dug makings from his pocket, began rolling a cigarette.

She said, "Do you know what'll happen to Captain Chauncy Adams when he finds he's a partner with Kruner?"

He smoothed the cigarette with his fingers, made no answer.

"He'll try to kill Kruner," she said. "And he'll be killed. Sooner or later he's going to find out that one of Kruner's men was at the wheel that night, and that he wrecked the packet on Kruner's orders."

Chet lit the cigarette. "What happens after I sell out to Kruner is not my business. I'm in this for ten thousand dollars. Then I'm out of it."

A small hand rose, slammed into the cigarette, ground the fire into his mouth. Fingernails left a trail of welts across his cheek. "Damn you, Burke!" she cried. She gouged both hands into his shirt, wrenched it. "You've got river water for blood, Burke! River water! Ten thousand, that's all you're worried about! And you're like Kruner, people's lives are only dollars!" She spun away from him, still raging, ran up the ladder to the texas.

He rubbed a hand across his burnt mouth and scratched cheek. What was the girl talking about! What was her stake in this? True enough, after the *Martha A* was sold to Kruner, things might be difficult for old Chauncy Adams. But what concern was that of Chet's? And why should the girl worry about it? Chet pondered it as he went below to watch the engineroom pumping.

* * *

At mid-morning the pumps were switched from the almost-dry engineroom to the after hold. Chet's men were gleeful as the stern began to rise, and all hands began clearing the logs from the starboard side, shoving them up forward. Several of the longest logs were bolted to the fo'c'sle, twenty feet protruding from each side. Since Chet doubted that the hole forward could be patched, the logs were secured tightly in case they should try to run to Yellowstone Bend with the forward hold still heavy with water.

It was afternoon when they saw the boat coming, a small craft creeping along the shoreline to avoid the current. Afraid that Kruner's men might be returning, Johanson got a big-bore rifle from the captain's cabin, stood in the pilothouse with it resting on the sill of a broken port. It seemed to be the only long-range gun aboard. The Duncan brothers had their own sixguns, and they took points of vantage behind the rail, while Chet stood on the main deck to await the boat. He was aware of the girl's being somewhere above.

Two men were rowing the boat, one a fattish, greasy-looking man. The other was small and moved jerkily. As they drew closer, Chet grinned. It was Captain Chauncy Adams, yanking feverishly at the oars, looking around, jerking back again to his work. As they pulled up alongside, the little captain hopped out, shouted and grabbed Chet's hand.

"Good work, boy!" he exploded. Chet was amazed at the change in him. His eyes were clear blue now, instead of the drunken eyes Chet remembered. His peak cap had a smartly polished brim, and was snowy white on top.

"So you got her raised! By God, that's good, boy! Patched her aft and raised her! By darn, you put some more logs under the bow and we'll run her straight to Yellowstone Bend." He jerked a hand toward the big man climbing over the rail. "Luke Davis, this is. Best engineer on this or any other river."

Chet shook hands with the greasy man

and saw a huge grin on his fat face. He hustled off immediately to the engine-room.

"I come up here to help in the fight, boy," Adams said. "Goin' to be hell to pay before long and I aim to have my cheekbone next to that big old rifle of mine! Other day I was goin' out for a drink and I saw that helmsman walkin' down the street with Russ Kruner. Helmsman that drove the *Martha A* on the sandstone. I got so fightin' mad that I quit drinkin' and got Luke Davis and headed up here, by darn!" His hands jerked around as he talked. "Luke found out you'd bought another raft of logs up to the mill. Well, 'bout then I got so mad at Kruner I got a gun and ran over to the Golden House and I was goin' to shoot him. So I found he wasn't there. He'd gone up to the mill."

"I didn't order any more logs." Chet was puzzled, and by more than the oldster's confused talk.

"Which means Kruner's comin' down the river with a raft full of wharf rats, by darn!" The oldster paced to and fro staring up at the hurricane deck. His deck. Suddenly he stopped short. His mouth opened. His eyes got wide.

Chet glanced up. The girl was up there, leaning over the rail, her red hair streaming down. She smiled quietly. "Hello, Dad," she said.

THE oldster let out a yell and galloped up the ladder. Chet turned and stared out over the river, listening to the *chug-chug* of the pump, mashing his knuckles into his palms. The girl was Old Chauncy Adams' daughter! She had been Charlotte, dancehall girl and Russ Kruner's girl friend, and—suddenly he understood. She had been fighting her own battle for the *Martha A*, the packet that bore her name.

They came down then and Chauncy was yelling and laughing. "What you think, Chet! Left school in St. Louis when she heard the *Martha A* was sunk! Come runnin' up here to lend a hand, and didn't even tell me. What you think? Pretty damn' good, Huh?"

Chet turned and smiled at him. The girl's stare was level, direct, and yet there was a bit of pleading in it, too. Her father did not know about the episode in the Golden House.

"She's been a big help," Chet said flatly. "A bit troublesome, maybe." He fingered his cheek, where the scratches from her fingernails still showed.

"Allus was troublesome," said the oldster. "Looky boy. We'll get the rest of the logs under the bow, see? By tonight we can start down-river. Can't go too soon. We're thirty miles from town, and Kruner can do anythin' out here that our guns can't stop him from doin'. We got to hurry." He ran half way up the ladder, stopped. "We'll whip this river, boy! By darn we will. Russ Kruner's mule teams better watch out when we get her patched up and buckin' up the river again!" He scrambled on toward the pilothouse.

Chet turned to go aft. She stopped him, Laying a hand gently on his arm. Dusk was coming across the river, and with it a faint fog. He turned, faced her. He wished he hadn't. The blue eyes were soft now, her lips full and seeming to reach for him.

"You understand?" she said. "Why I had you thrown out of the Golden House? I had to make you fight, to get you mad at Kruner."

"What were you doing there in the first place?" he said gruffly.

"I suspicioned that Kruner caused the sinking of the packet. I wanted information so I could get some legal way to make Kruner pay for what he'd done. I knew the loss was driving dad to drink himself to death." Her face dropped, and she toyed with a button on her shirt. "I found that wouldn't work. And then I had only you to work on. If I could make you side with dad against Kruner, by getting you angry, all right. If you went through with your plan to sell your share to Kruner, I had to make sure the boat wasn't raised. If Kruner should get half the boat, he'd kill dad. I know it. And I thought, better a drunken father than a dead one."

"Why is Kruner so set on sinking the *Martha A?*"

"It was the symbol of competition to his wagon trains. While dad was bucking the river with it, people had hope the freight monopoly would be broken. If he buys into the refloated packet, there'll

be trouble. Vigilante law, maybe. He's determined it won't rise to fight him again."

He looked out over the water, to the swirling yellow that marked the channel.

"But if he doesn't stop us, he'll buy my share. He has to. And my choice is battling this devlish river, or ten thousand."

"What's it to be?" she said.

He didn't reply. A hand touched his shoulder, moved slowly around his neck. Another joined it, and she crushed herself against him, moved those red half-parted lips against his. He felt the warm roundness of her body against him, the passionate surge of her lips. Suddenly she jerked away.

"Damn! I don't want to buy you!" she gasped. She stood before him, flushed and angry, clenching her small fists. "That wasn't to—to force you, you big lug! That was—from me!" Her voice trailed off and she ran up the ladder.

Chet turned toward the river, rubbed his hands together until they hurt. He was a fool, he thought. He had set out to make a stake, a ten thousand stake that would start his fortune. Was he to let a red-haired vixen and an excitable old worn-out captain jerk him away from that goal? He tramped forward to work with the logs. He hoped the back-breaking work would calm him.

THEY worked by moonlight, used every bit of rope, wire and cable on the ship to tie the logs fast. There was a log boom now, protruding fifteen feet on each side of the bow, extending twenty feet forward to make a false bow. A heavy, unwieldy thing, but it had raised the bow to a foot above the water. She would be sluggish, hard to handle. But she would move. Chet stood there on the forward logs, and a shrill scream of escaping steam pierced the night. Captain Chauncy Adams leaned out of the pilot's window.

"Steam up, Pilot!" he yelled. "If I had a cargo I'd make the up-river run, by darn!"

Chet grinned. That was carrying it a little too far. By babying the packet they should make Yellowstone Bend, drifting with the river and keeping up enough steam to maintain steerageway. Then the captain yelled again. This time his voice was shrill.

"Here they come!"

Chet jerked around, stared up the river. A long, wide blot on the moontrail. A raft. For a moment he tried to tell himself that it could be any flatboater hauling grain to Yellowstone Bend. But there were no heaps of grain on the raft. He saw figures moving. Too many for a cargo raft. He ran for the pilothouse, yelling.

"Throw off the lines! We're going to move!" He saw Johanson and the Duncans heaving off lines that were tied to willows ashore. Then he charged up to the pilothouse, slammed inside. Martha was standing at the engineroom telegraph, the old captain was at the wheel. "Ring quarter speed forward," Chauncy said.

She pushed the brass handles forward, returned them, forward again. The bell tinkled and Chauncy laughed aloud. He spun the wheel to port as the packet began to move, and the *clack* of paddles reached their ears. Then he flung the wheel over to midships, to keep the paddles from striking the sandstone. They stood tensed, waiting for a splintering crash. Chet glanced to the shore. Slowly, it was moving away. Chauncy spun the wheel to the left again. Like a man carrying a heavy burden, the *Martha A* heeled to port. The logs on the bow creaked with the strain.

"Used to jump if I slapped her over that way," Chauncy said. His voice was quiet, grim. They all felt that way. The big raft was closer, but staying in the channel.

Chet found himself s p e a k i n g his thoughts. "They'll meet us, because we're moving so slow. They'll have a dozen or more rifles, and they'll come swarming aboard. And we can't stop them. Our forward gunwales are only a foot above the water."

They didn't answer. The raft could maneuver almost as easily as they. The *Martha A* struggled toward the channel. Already the raft was down-stream from them. They saw sweeps shoved over the side, a dozen men moving the raft just out of the current. The raft was almost still. Waiting. Chet saw that they had made a log barricade around the edges.

Adams motioned for him to take the

wheel. He gripped it in his hands, felt it tight. The packet was no better than a scow, he thought. The old captain stooped in a corner, came up with the heavy rifle. He rested it on a sill, levered a shell into the chamber and fired. The shot rang out through the night, over the sound of the clanking paddles. It was long range. But it brought an answer. A dozen tiny bursts of flame on the raft. A slug thumped into the wood over their heads. Chet took one hand from the wheel and clenched the handle of the Colt stuck in his belt. One rifle against a dozen. At that range a Colt would be useless. And Kruner's men would throw a covering fire while they boarded.

"Well, Pilot Burke," the girl said. "You won't have to worry about selling your share to Kruner. This packet will never make Yellowstone Bend. It'll be burning to the water in a couple of hours."

"We'll make it there," he growled.

"And will you sell?" She left the telegraph, moved next to him. The old captain seemed not to hear them. He was watching the raft with fierce intensity. Martha's hand clutched Chet's arm. "Maybe the question won't matter," she said. "Maybe there's no use worrying about it."

He gripped the spokes hard. Suddenly he knew. He turned to her and grinned. "If this packet can do what I'm going to make it do, I'll stick. Because if it can do that, it can take anything the Yellowstone has to offer!"

Chauncy spun toward him. "What's that?"

He grinned, yanked a cigar from his pocket and stuck it in his mouth. "Full speed ahead! We'll see what this old packet's got!"

The captain grabbed his arm. "She'll swamp! You can't do that, the boat's carryin' half the river!"

Chet laughed. "Captain, if she can take the springtime river she can do it. If she can't she can sink and be damned!"

"But, Chet," the girl said, "it isn't reasonable."

"Ring full speed ahead," he ordered. "Listen, girl. I'm thinking with my heart, or whatever high-sounding phrase you used. It was reasonable to sell my

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share to Kruner. I'm through with being reasonable. I'm going to bust that raft wide open, and after we've got this boat fixed up we're going to bust the myth of the unconquerable Yellowstone!"

The bell clanged as she drove the handles full forward. A voice came bellowing out of the engineroom speaking tube. "Full speed you want? You crazy?"

Chet leaned over to the tube. "Sure, we're crazy up here! Luke Davis, you open the throttles wide and get set for a crash!"

THE RAFT loomed larger. The sweeps came out again and men heaved the raft out into the current, squarely in the packet's path. They could see that the packet had to ride the stream. Her head was too low to dodge them in the shallows. Chet felt the current hit them as they rode into it. He threw the wheel hard to port, felt the ship creak as she twisted. Three hundred yards ahead the raft lay like a black blot on the water. Then fire began to spurt from it. A window smashed. Chet's heart leaped into his throat. He heard Johanson, out on the texas, swearing at the raft. He gripped the wheel hard, forced it to starboard. Grudgingly, it responded. He watched the logs tied to the bow, bulky, protruding masses. They had worked hard at fastening them to the packet. Would they hold? He felt the packet increasing speed.

"We've got to warn them," he said. He grinned at that, grasped the whistle cord. The whistle blast wouldn't make them happy, either. A whistle had that way about it. He yanked. The scream cut the night air. He released it, yanked again. Four times the whistle blasted out. He could see the men on the raft moving hurriedly to escape the crash. "Give 'em some lead!" he yelled to the captain. "Johanson, you, Duncan, fire everything you got."

The texas shook to the sound of gunfire. Chauncy chortled happily as he blasted the big gun. Gunsmoke drifted in with its acrid stink.

"One minute!" Chet bellowed. "One minute we hit. Get ready to hit the deck!" He yanked the wheel a little to starboard, saw that the raft was end on toward them,

uneven logs jutting toward the bow of the *Martha A.* It was scarcely a hundred feet between them now. He saw a squatty figure standing on the raft, yelling orders. Kruner! He had come to supervise the final wrecking of the *Martha A.* And as he saw him, Chet knew he was right. He could never sell to that man, could never do anything but fight him. He heard himself yelling.

"Hit the deck!" he screamed. He flung himself to the deck, gripped the lowest spokes of the wheel. The shock flung him against it, wrenched his hands from the spokes. He cursed, heard pans clanging in the galley, a scream from the raft. He vaulted to his feet. The bow was a jumble of logs. Men were scrambling, leaping off the raft into the water. And as he watched, the raft split in two. One half was caught by the logs to starboard of the bow, exploded into the air. The *Martha A's* logs had held!

Then he saw men scrambling from the exploding raft onto the low main deck. He found himself running out of the pilothouse, sliding down the ladder, pounding forward. He was dimly aware that footsteps were coming after him. He yanked the Colt from his belt, leveled it at a man who had clambered out of the water, still clutching a rifle. The rifle barked as the man stood on the gunwale. Lead ripped along Chet's scalp. He seemed strangely cool as he fired. The man took the lead in his chest, slammed backwards into the water. The river was full of men thrown from the raft, struggling and yelling. Lead crashed from behind. He turned.

Johanson and the Duncans were behind him, setting up a wall of flame, blasting at the jumbled bow. A small, thin man was racing toward them. Chet saw the green vest, the thin face contorted by hate. It was Willard. An avalanche of lead crashed into the little man and he went down like a rag doll. That was when lead slammed into Chet's shoulder. He shook, groaned, turned to his left.

Chet saw Kruner leveling the gun again, a heavy, short-barreled sixgun. He was unaware of what his own gun was doing. He felt his thumb yanking hammer, felt the yanking jolt as it bucked against his palm. Smoke drifted up into

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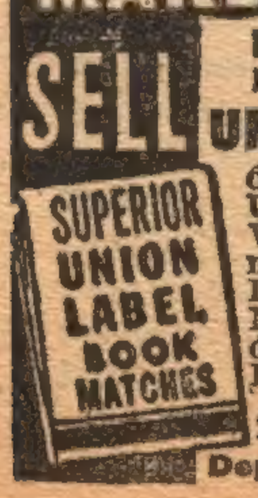

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his face. Russ Kruner stood there, staggering. Blood streamed out of his coat, and he tried to yank the hammer on his gun. It didn't work. His crouch loosened and he went stubbornly to the deck, still trying to work the gun. Finally it blasted off and a piece of lead screamed up at the stars. Slowly Kruner folded over the gun, slumped into an inert heap. He died instantly.

Chet was suddenly aware that the firing was over. Johanson and the Duncans were behind him, smoke whipping from their guns. On the texas, Chauncy Adams was yelling and laughing, gripping his heavy rifle in one hand. The engines had been cut. The *Martha A* was drifting slowly down-stream, shoving aside logs to which men were clinging. But their own logs had held. Smashed and shaken, the *Martha A* and her logs moved groggily along. But she moved. Chet grinned and felt his heart pound. He knew he had made the right decision.

As he stood there he was aware of Martha Adams, running along the deck, her face flushed, the red hair wild and streaming behind. She was sobbing and laughing as she threw herself into his arms.

"She—made it, didn't she!" the girl gasped. "And you promised that you'd stick—"

Chet hugged her tight, grinned at Johanson, who stood staring. "Better pull those outlaws out of the river, Johanson." He saw the big Swede and the Duncans hurry over to the gunwales. Chet whispered, "When we get into Yellowstone Bend I'm going to show you some courting. Some courting that—that's got some heart into it. And then, you and Cap'n Adams and me, we're going to beat this river. Yessir, girl. I'll show you some courting that'll sweep you off your pretty feet!"

She smiled up at him. "You already have, Chet. You already have. I've loved you since I first saw you."

Above, they heard Captain Chauncy Adams yelling into the speaking tube. "Full speed ahead, Luke! By God, full speed ahead!"

The *Martha A* began moving.

THE END

On the eve of the gay Mardi Gras, Orson Foxworth, financial buccaneer, gave a dinner at world famous Antoine's for seven extraordinary guests. One was beautiful young Odile St. Amant, an unkissed wife, who ached with desperate longing for the embraces of Leonce, her playboy husband. And at the table sat Odile's younger sister, voluptuous Caresse, who resided with Odile and her husband in the family mansion. She drove Leonce to a maddening desire to put an end to his wife so that he could possess her.

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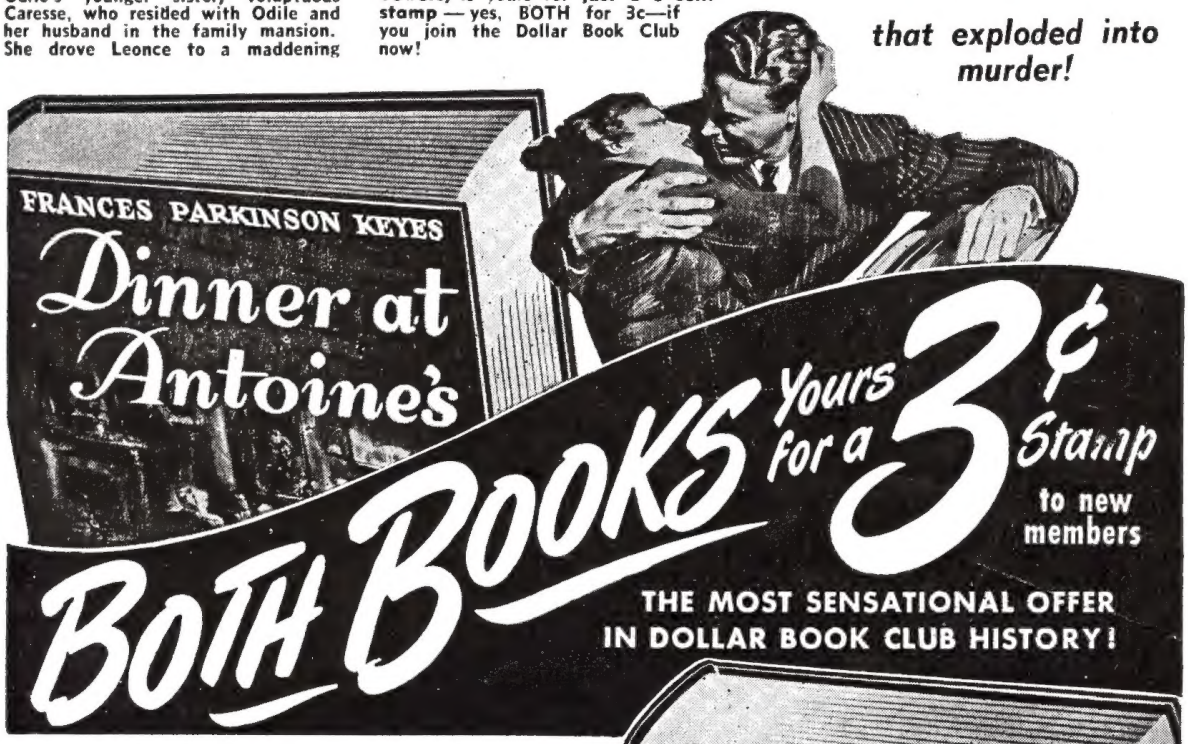
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